Essay Title
Visual Culture

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European Influences on Irish and British Art Essay

Critical Cultures Elective

4. The female Impressionist painters explored different themes to their male counterparts.

Select one female artist and one male artist and discuss this statement.

When you think of the famous group of Impressionist, the very first people that come to mind would be; Claude Monet, Pierre-August Renoir, Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas. All male artists, but there were also some female artists that were involved in this famous group. Artists like Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, Marie Bracquemond (referred to as “The Three Great Ladies” of Impressionism) and others such as Helen McNicoll were very much a part of the Impressionist movement. (Pfeiffer (n.d.) cited in Peterson 2017). This essay will present a comparison of the work of both the female impressionist, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) and the male Impressionist, Edgar Degas (1834-1917). A discussion of the themes that both of these artists have portrayed within their work and how their genders affected the subject matter of their paintings will be presented.

 Impressionists liked to paint real life subjects and scenes, everyday life, people at work, women and children at play. They focussed on colour and composition and their style was not as refined as the studio based art that preceded it. (Brodskaïa 2018, 2014 & Peterson, 2017)

Berthe Morisot was a French painter and printmaker and was one of the most famous female Impressionism artists and exhibited her work in seven of the eight Impressionist Exhibitions. (Peterson, 2017)

Morisot decided at a very early age that she would like to pursue art and was introduced to the style of impressionism by Édouard Manet and married his youngest brother Eugene Manet and they had one daughter, Julie in 1878. She painted many of the themes explored by impressionism, including the working and family life of females, the leisure and pleasure habits of the middle and upper classes of the time, and her own personal life was the fundamental theme of her work, in particular her sisters, nephew, husband and daughter.

Degas was one of the founders of Impressionism, although he rejected the term and preferred the term ‘realist’. He preferred to draw and paint indoors and most of his artwork is associated with ballet dancers. Over half of the remainder of his work includes the theme of the modern woman of the time. (EdgarDegas.net 2010)

**Exterior v Interior Themes:**

Comparing Berthe Morisot’s painting *View of Paris from the Trocadero (1871-72) (Fig 1.)* and Edgar Degas *The Orchestra at the Opera (1870) (Fig 2.).* It was very rare for women to be able to travel outside of their home without a male chaperone. Because of this it was a strong unfair factor for the female artists as they could not travel outside at their pleasure and paint freely like their male counterparts. They would stay at home and use their domestic daily lives as subject matters. These women would often paint children playing, maids cleaning, women doing their daily routines and their loved ones. Unlike their male peers who would freely explore to the city of Paris and its Cafes, Ballet, Brothels, Cityscapes and Landscapes.

*“The most successful works of Cassatt, Morisot and Bracquemond tended to draw from their own experiences as women and quotidian activities. While the male impressionists explored themes of nature and Parisian city life” (Peterson, 2017)*

Looking at Berthe Morisot’s painting *View of Paris from the Trocadero (1871-72) (Fig 1.)*



*(Fig 1.) Berthe Morisot, View of Paris from the Trocadero, Oil, 1871-72, Santa Barbra Museum of Art (Brodskaia, 2018,2014)*

It was very rare to see a woman painting outside of their homes, but Morisot did a few and this is one. In the painting we see three main female characters in the foreground, they are said to be Morisot’s sisters Yves and Edma and Yves’ daughter. These women are on a hill, now called the Palais de Charillot. We see these figures excluded for the city life and alone on the hilltop.

*“likely indicative of the way in which Morisot and her sisters, as bourgeois women, were excluded from the everyday life of the city and from many professional opportunities as artists” (The Arts Story Blog, 2021)*

This is a representation of how these upper-class women were not given the opportunities that their male counterparts could easily have. The large green field separating the figures from the busy beige city life is like the line between genders and the unfairness that these female artists suffered. They did not have the freedom to discover and explore the city life.

While looking at Edgar Degas’ Painting *The Orchestra at the Opera (1870) (Fig 2.)* we can see fourteen men playing many different instruments forthe music of the ballet in the foreground and the Ballet dancers that have just their faces cut off by the canvas’ edge on stage in the background. Almost immediately, while looking at Degas’ painting we can see that the men of the orchestra are painted in dark browns, blacks and greys this gives off a more masculine atmosphere. These colours are more dominate which is typically associated with being a male feature. While in the background we see the beautifully dressed, in their costumes and in graceful poses the ballet dancers on stage representing femininity and the idea that women are for looking at or for the male gaze. In this painting there is also a line separating the genders like in Morisot’s painting, we can see the clear line of the stage

*(Fig 2.) The Orchestra at the Opera, Oil, 1870, Musée d’Orsay Station (Impressionists.org, 2015)*

separating both genders, women on stage and men on the floor playing instruments.

Many Impressionist artists both female and male artists, they painted women or used women as their subject matter, but they would paint them very differently. Looking at Berthe Morisot’s *Julie (1894) (Fig 3.)* and Edgar Degas *L’Absinthe (1875-76) (Fig 4.)* both are portraits of female relations of the artists. Morisot depicted women in their everyday life washing combing their hair makeup similar subjects to Degas. However, Morisot turned this threshold theme on its head and instead of serving the viewer with women naked, often bent over, a sexualized image, the emphasis from Morisot is on the subject’s internal experiences. Myres (2018) suggests that the themes you will find in Morisot’s depictions of women are ‘self-absorption’ and ‘introspection’ and her use of brushwork deflects away from the prospect of an erotic gaze. Much of this work could be compared to Dega’s work. Her ‘Young Woman Powerding Herself’ and the ‘Woman at her Toilette’ are very close to his work. However, Degas portraits of modern womens grooming and working activity is seen from the perspective of the ‘male viewer’ who could peer at women and the theme of many were of the working lives of women who worked as prostitutes and endured sexual slavery. This is a stark contrast to the work of Morisot. (Hoakley, 2017 & Willette 2010).

*(Fig 4.) Julie, Berthe Morisot, Oil, 1894, Private Collection (Artschaft, 2017)*

Morisot’s Daughter Julie and Degas’ cousin Estelle from New Orleans. Morisot painted her daughter Julie multiple times because again she wasn’t able to travel like her male peers and paint the public and the outside world. While looking at this painting we see Julie staring back at her mother or the viewer. Her hair is down and natural, she is wearing a white loose dress as she sits in a casual pose, she seems to have her legs crossed which wasn’t staged or formal and her head resting on her right hand. Her dress is a bright white colour and loose fitted, it represents the themes of innocence and adolescence of the young girl. Comparing this to Degas paintings of women in cafes, where he would paint them in up right poses, wearing fancy clothes and looking put together or the ballerinas on stage performing for the world. These ballerinas too, wore white or bright colours however the innocence is lost to the location and performance for other’s enjoyment and pleasure. Morisot painted the women and girls in a real and raw way, she did not idealise or prettify them. Like Degas and many other male Impressionists would paint these women in public and made them appealing to the viewer. They would be dressed in their fine clothes, makeup and hair up, a hat and neatly away from the face. They were pretty and easy to look at. Morisot did not worry about it being appealing but so that the viewer could see the real life of women. What they actually looked like and how they lived their domestic lives at home and their daily routines. She made them realistic.

(*Fig 4.) L’Absinthe, Edgar Degas, Oil, 1875-76, Musée d’Orsay (Brodskaia, 2014)*

Both Morisot and Degas painted families and children. We can see in the paintings *The Cradle (1872) (Fig 5.)* by Berthe Morisot and *Count Lepic and His Daughters, (18) (Fig 6.)* by Edgar Degas, the theme of family.

*(Fig 6.) Count Lepic and His Daughters, 1871, Foundation E.G. Bührle (Edgar-Degas, 2010)*

*(Fig 5.) The Cradle, Berthe Morisot, 1872, Musée d’Orsay (Brodskaia, 2014)*

In Morisot’s painting *The Cradle (1872) (Fig 5.)* we see Morisot’s sister Edma looking down at her sleeping young daughter, Blanche. Morisot’s focus on new motherhood is the theme of

this beautiful painting. She has painted her sister observing her baby daughter as if she is worrying about her, and making sure she is peaceful and calm while sleeping. A feeling most mothers feel when they have a new born or have young children. The motherly worry or instinct. Again it is a daily occurrence, it is not staged or put together. It was a capture of what mothers do with their children and how they show much love and care for them. While looking at the painting *Count Lepic and His Daughters, (18) (Fig 6.)* by Edgar Degas, we see a father sitting with his two daughters for a family portrait. Theposes and postures of the family members in the painting show a sense of staging and stiffness. The two baby girls are both looking straight at the viewer, which has a sense of realness because if you were to watch a situation of a stranger painting in front of them, it would be new and fascinating. They would most definitely be staring towards the artist. The poses of the family is very different to the pose of the mother in Morisot’s painting, where she is slouched and not looking towards the viewer. While looking at Degas painting of the father and his daughters, you do not feel the same emotions and feelings that the mother of Morisot’s painting is feeling. The father almost seems to holding his children for the painting and making sure they look presentable. He is not worrying if they are enjoying this experience or having fun. It is like they are just there for the painting. Degas did not capture the emotions of a parent with their children, unlike Morisot where she used it as the main theme of the painting. Even the name of the painting ‘The Cradle’ is a representation to how the mother is caring for her child. The child is in a cradle but it could be a reference to a protection hold a parent has to a young child, Cradling.

Morisot’s paintings were where she catalogued her daughters growth. As well as the painting outlined above, she is also seen in other works, playing with her father, friends or a doll. These paintings were natural and perhaps illustrate Morisot’s ‘ideal family life’, however, many have considered them to be superficially charming and delicate themes. Compare this to Degas who also painted family members, from one of his first works (1858) showing the Bellelli family (his aunt and her husband) which whilst completed in the impressionist style is still appears rigid and staged. (Brodskaia, 2018, Harris & Zucker 2013).

 Finally Morisot’s 1884 ‘Julie with her nanny’ is a stark contrast to Degas’s depiction of nannies in parks looking static and fed up whilst, the mother and an older child play in the background, taking

 Despite both Berthe Morisot and Edgar Degas being part of the Impressionist movement and having a friendship and close association, they covered similar subject matter like painting women, families and more. Though the subject matter that they both covered was so similar the themes that they used with in their work could not be more different. While Degas work was mainly of beautiful Ballerinas in bright expensive gowns and tutus he chose to paint them in a more likeable way, as if they were for show and for peoples enjoyment. He would paint women out in cafés, in a public setting which would sexualise them and make it seem as though they were prostitutes, because bourgeois women or women of importance would not be seen outside of the house without a male chaperone. But, Morisot painted women, children and maids firstly because it was the only subject matter the female artists could have because it was difficult to travel around freely. She would paint these women with the themes of motherhood, innocence, adolescence and the realness of the domestic lives of these women. They were not just for looking at but they were used to show the viewer what it was like as a women and the struggles they faced. How, what they were doing on a daily bases made them strong and beautiful heroines of the art. She did not make the women physically appealing or eye-catching, like Degas’ paintings. He showed the women in graceful poses or sitting up right like they are for looking at. She showed normal and typical behaviours of the people she painted. They were real and not sugar coated, they were not performing for the world, they were just living. The work of the female Impressionist artists is unfortunately not as well studied or investigated as their male counterparts, which is unfair to these women because their work is just as influential and at the same standard of greatness as their male counterparts.

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