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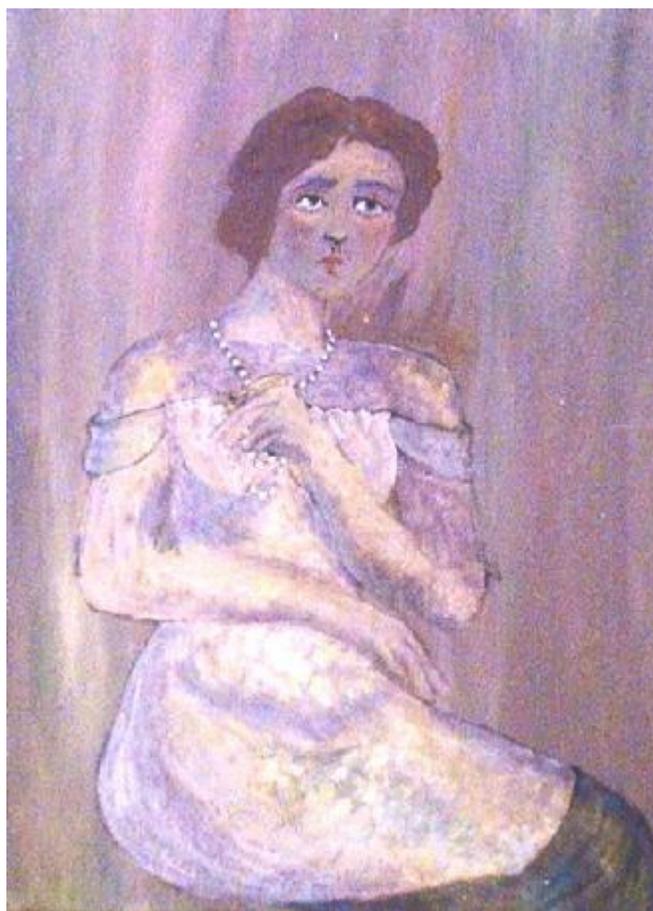
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Come in...and be captivated...

Exploration of Theme



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In this section, we aim to explore themes in popular literature, poetry, plays, art and music. In doing so, we gain new understandings and learn more through the words of the greats and the potent images of our collective histories. Write in, tell us your interpretations of your favorite works, and feel free to suggest the next piece of culture we research to divine its theme! Contact us! themes@thewriteplaceatthewritetime.org

Henry James called it "one of the greatest love stories of the world." *Camille* or (*The Lady of the Camellias*) by Alexandre Dumas, *fils* has been re-imagined and retold a multitude of times since its debut in 1848, re-capturing imaginations across the globe. At the heart of this classic is a protagonist, Marguerite Gautier who challenges societal conventions and archetypes as a courtesan who loves one man deeply enough to sacrifice everything for his well-being.

Toril Moi, a professor of Literature and Romance Studies at Duke University delves into feminist theory to explain the revelatory quality of this novel that ventures into uncharted territory. Moi describes in the introduction how at the beginning of the novel, a copy of *Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost is auctioned off as a possession of the late Marguerite. This is used as a device to highlight the difference between the characters of Manon who abuses the love of a young gentleman and Marguerite who selflessly surrenders her life and worldly possessions for the young Armand who holds her heart. Dumas created in this sympathetic character a woman that did not fit into the Madonna-Whore archetypes yet formed a more human personification.

The author's purpose in doing so might be owed to the fact that he himself had a great love in the real life courtesan Marie Duplessis and was also the illegitimate progeny of the famous author Alexandre Dumas, *père* (*The Three Musketeers, The Count of Monte Cristo, The Man in the Iron Mask...*) and dress-maker, Marie-Laure-Catherine Labay. Dumas, *fils* was always empathetic to the plight of women involved in difficult love affairs due to insurmountable circumstances or the ultimate scorn from their former lovers and believed that illegitimate children resulting from these unions should be legitimized by marriage. Ironically, Dumas' own grandfather was the illegitimate child of an

African slave and a French aristocrat. His father, sharing this bloodline, only recognized him legally when he was seven years old and then took him from his mother for schooling. Dumas received the highest education possible and would follow in his father's footsteps as an extraordinary writer.

Published when he was only twenty-four, *Camille* is largely autobiographical as it followed the end of Dumas' affair with Marie Duplessis who died from tuberculosis as did the book's protagonist. The strained father-son relationship in the book is also similar to that of Dumas and his father. The noble-hearted young man in the novel, Armand Duval, shares not only the spirit but the initials of Dumas. Though Dumas admitted that his real life lover did not sacrifice as the protagonist does for love, he maintained that this was because he would not let her do so. One might wonder whether the book is a way of retelling the love affair in such a way that elevated Duplessis as an idol and gave to him the surrender he craved yet never truly received.

Dumas went on to marry, be admitted to the Académie française and was awarded the Légion d'honneur. Upon his death he was interred in the Cimetière de Montmartre in Paris. It is interesting, perhaps even fated, that his final resting place is only about 100 metres away from that of Marie Duplessis.

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