

La Traviata

Program notes by Paul Zweifel
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The plot of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *La Traviata* is two layers removed from being factual. Level one is the play *La Dame aux Camélias* on which Verdi and his librettist, Francesco Maria Piave, built their plot, while level two is the novel of the same name on which the play was based. The real-life story told of the tragic love affair between the beautiful Parisian prostitute Alphonsine Plessis (who later took the more elegant name Marie Duplessis) and Alexandre Dumas, *fils*, son of Alexander Dumas, *père*, author of *The Three Musketeers*. Both the semi-autobiographical novel, published in 1848, and the play written a year later were the work of Dumas, *fils*.¹ The opera is a quite faithful representation of the play (with some excisions necessary to compress the five-act play to a length appropriate for the Italian operatic stage). The play, on the other hand, differs quite drastically from the novel. It is difficult to say how true the novel is to the actual story of Marie and Alexandre, but by piecing together parts of it with what we know of the lovers' actual lives we can get a pretty accurate picture of the story behind the story of *La Traviata*.

Literary critics consider the play of great importance in the history of 19th-century French drama; it represented a turning-point from the Romantic tradition towards realism. For example, prostitutes had appeared in earlier plays but only as stereotyped figures that threatened bourgeois respectability. On the other hand, Marguerite Gautier (the name Dumas gives to Marie in both novel and play) is a real-life, three-dimensional figure who is not at all evil; in fact as the story progresses she exhibits true nobility by giving up her lover (Armand Duval) for the good of his family. And the drama is realistic in that all of its characters are based on real people (thinly-disguised to the Parisian audiences).

The play was one of the dramatic triumphs of the 19th century; its success continued into the 20th century in the cinema as well as on stage. Notable actresses who have performed the role of Marguerite include, among many others, Eleanora Duse and Sarah Bernhardt on the stage and Bernhardt again as well as Pola Negri and Greta Garbo on the screen. (In its English versions the play is usually called *Camille*.) Verdi attended the first performance of in

Paris, in 1852, and turned it into the opera which premiered in Venice only a year later.

I'll try her to sketch the real story as nearly as I can make it out. Sometime in 1844 Armand meets Marie, briefly, at the opera. (They are both 20 years old.) Marie's love of the theater and her penchant for wearing camellias are attributed to Marguerite in Chapter II of the novel:

Marguerite was present at all first nights and spent each evening in the theater or at a ball...she always had with her a bunch of camellias. For twenty-five days in every month the camellias were white, and for five they were red. No one ever knew the reason for this variation in color which I mention but cannot explain.

The author's "inability" to explain is of course an example of 19th century delicacy.

Alexandre is smitten with Marie on the spot. A little later Marie is confined to her bed for some weeks with a flare-up of the tuberculosis which is to kill her three years later; Alexandre calls at her home every day to inquire about her, never leaving his name. When Marie gets better, Alexandre's friend Eugène Dejazet (the Gaston of the novel and play and Gastone of the opera), takes him to Marie's apartment for supper. (This is the first scene of the opera which is set at a large party at her friend Flora's, a change made no doubt to get some chorus action into the scene.)

Marie is touched by Alexandre's devotion, both by the daily visits which she now finds out about for the first time and at his concern at a coughing fit she suffers. She agrees to become his mistress, giving him a flower which he is instructed to return the next day. In the play and opera Marie asks him to return when the flower withers, but in the novel she gives him a red flower and tells him to come back the next day for a white one. The overt sexuality of this encounter was too much for either the theater or the opera house.

During the next month in Paris Marie is unfaithful to Alexandre on a number of occasions, but these are simply business deals, not love. He is of course jealous, but then business is business!

The lovers next rent a summer house in the village of Bougival, eight miles from Paris. They live there for four months, and Marie decides to be faithful to her lover, leading to a serious loss of income. As a result she is forced to sell or pawn most of her belongings. At this point in novel, opera and play the father intervenes and persuades Marguerite/Violetta to give up Armand/Alfredo because their liaison threatens his daughter's marriage. This is pure fiction. The lovers break up for financial reasons: Marie needed income. (One of her new lovers was Franz Liszt.)

Alexandre still finds it difficult to give up Marie, and he persuades her to spend one night in his bed. The next day, in a jealous rage after she leaves, he sends her a letter enclosing 500 francs for her "services." This is the origin of the scene in play and opera when Armand/Alfredo hurls his gambling winnings at his ex-mistress's feet as payment for services rendered.

Between Acts II and III of the opera, Alfredo goes to a foreign country, according to the letter from Giorgio Germont that Violetta reads aloud at the beginning of Act III. This is accurate: Alexandre left France after the breakup of the affair, but unlike what happens in play and opera, he returns to Paris only after Marie is dead. And the duel mentioned in the Germont letter does not take place in real life.

Marie's did on Feb. 3, 1847, during Carnival as we learn from the opera. (To Anina: Is today a holiday? All Paris is going crazy with Carnival.) Ash Wednesday fell on Feb. 17 in 1847, so Carnival was in full swing on Feb. 3.

Throughout the opera, Verdi and Piave, are quite careful call Violetta a prostitute, preferring the milder term "traviata" (straying woman). But Alphonsine (before changing her name) *was* a prostitute. At age 16 she escapes from a brutal father, who had forced her into prostitution when she was 12. She comes to Paris and begins working the streets as a *grisette*. Later, because of her beauty, she became a higher-class prostitute, a *demi-mondaine*.² The novel, unlike the opera, is very explicit about her profession. In Chapter XI, Marguerite herself refers to her work as "prostitution" (same word, same meaning in English and French). And her friend Prudence, in Chapter XII, gives an economic analysis of the profession which could have been taken from a sociology text.

Alexandre Dumas, *fil*s, was a respected member of the French literary establishment until his death 1895, but none of his other works ever achieved the lasting fame of *La Dame aux Camélias*. In 1875 he was elected to the French Academy.

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1. *Camélia* is a misspelling of the French word *camélia*. Dumas, who evidently was a poor speller, got the title from a George Sand novel, *Isadora* (1846) whose heroine has the same nickname.
 2. *Grisettes* , working girls making extra money in the streets, took their names from their gray clothes. Dumas, *fil*s himself coined the term *demi-monde*, referring to the layer of society between the bourgeois and the underworld.