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The Emotional Edgar Degas: Waiting, Boredom, and Expectation in Degas' *L'Absinthe*

PETER TOOHEY

University of Calgary, Canada

ptoohey@ucalgary.ca

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0688-7031>

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Abstract: This article reinterprets Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe* (1875–1876) as a complex study of emotion rather than merely a work of social critique. It argues that the painting foregrounds the interrelated experiences of waiting, boredom, and frustrated expectation, central to Degas' depiction of modern life. Through comparison with *Waiting (L'Attente)* (1880–1882) and other works, the article highlights the importance of Degas' 'double-subject' compositions, in which paired figures generate temporal and emotional tension. Waiting is presented as an anticipatory state tied to expectation, while boredom emerges when expectation is diminished or deferred. In *L'Absinthe*, the female figure embodies a condition in which expectation is not absent but blunted, producing a more complex emotional state than the conventional 'situational' boredom seen in works such as Manet's *La Prune*. Degas thus offers a nuanced representation of modern emotional life that anticipates later notions of existential boredom.

Keywords: Degas, *L'Absinthe*, boredom, waiting, expectation.

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Two of the emotions that Degas often depicts are boredom and waiting (I am serious about waiting as an emotion). Degas' boredom and waiting paintings are often linked with one another. This makes sense. Boredom is an emotion that is often reliant for its substance on the experience of a waiting that is too long or without timely relief. In addition, waiting may derive its emotional status from its unvarying link to expectation and this too may be the case for boredom. Expectation, doubtless an emotion too, is frequently linked or associated with something desirable, though of course it can be linked to something undesirable.¹ Usually, it's one or the other of these, but it's not linked normally to something of small emotional significance. Why does this matter? Part of the fascination of Degas' painting resides not just in the evocation of telling personal scenes from daily life, but also in his evocation of significant emotions that are to be associated with daily life. Two of these, I am going to try to show you, are waiting and boredom. A third, closely linked with these two, is expectation. I will suggest that, in the case of Degas' painting, *L'Absinthe*, we are witnessing waiting and boredom but also frustrated expectation.²

1. Waiting (1): *The Absinthe Drinker* (1875–1876)

Edgar Degas (1834–1917), as far as I know, has a small number of creations with the term 'waiting' in their title. Those with which I am familiar are: *Waiting for a Client* (n.d.), a drawing of prostitutes waiting for a client; *Waiting* (n.d., second version), a drawing of prostitutes waiting for a client; *Waiting (L'Attente)* (1880–1882), the painting of a young ballerina and her chaperone waiting to audition (we'll look at this shortly); *Waiting* (1874–1884), a monotype in brown ink of a prostitute; *Waiting in the Wings* (n.d.), a painting of a group of ballerinas; and *Waiting Ballerinas* (1896), a painting of a group of ballerinas readying to perform. But quite a number of Degas' other creations embrace this theme of waiting but without using the term waiting at all in their titles.³ Degas, unlike most artists, is a frequent painter of waiting.

I'd like to focus on one very famous image from Degas' mid-career.⁴ Its theme, I believe, is waiting, although it does not have the term in its title. This is the famous *L'Absinthe* (1875–

¹ Andreas Elpidorou in his *Propelled* (2020) speaks of the "positivity of waiting" (pp. 134–139) which I believe is a pretty good way of understanding waiting. He also cites George Loewenstein's work on the positivity of waiting—"Anticipation and the Valuation of Delayed Consumption" (1987), a study which I had overlooked. Elpidorou uses the term 'anticipation' rather than 'expectation'. It matches well with the characterization of waiting in Frank Partnoy's book, *Wait: The Art and Science of Delay* (2012). I've used her term expectation because, unlike anticipation, which implies a reasonable level of emotional engagement, the term expectation is emotionally neutral.

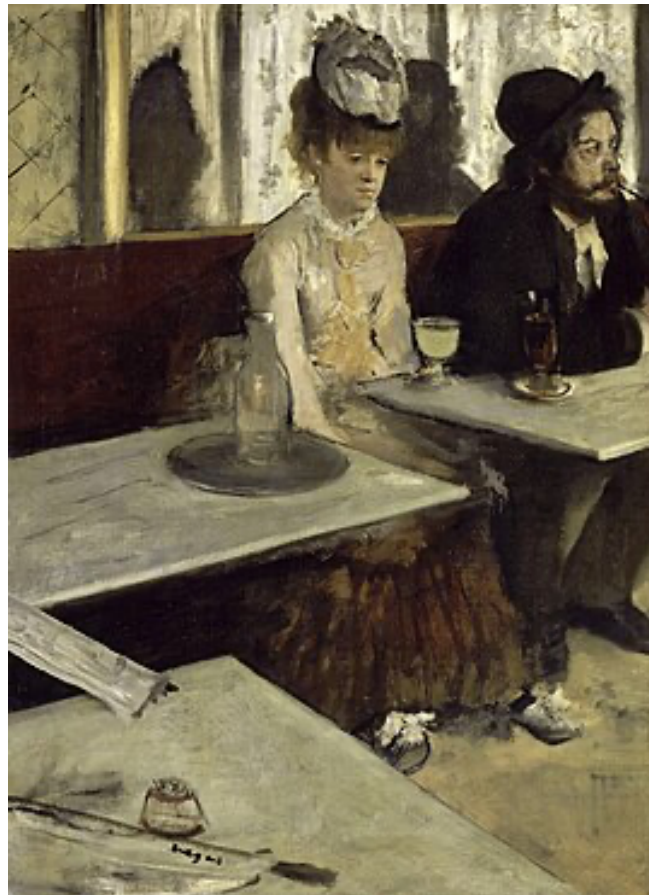
² T. J. Clark, in his influential *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1984), doesn't think well of Degas and this painting. If I understand him correctly, Degas 'paints down' at the lower classes such as the two people in *L'Absinthe*, without willingly or even by chance questioning his own superior social standing. They become his puppets. Degas' attempts, such as to be seen in our canvas, not to 'paint down' were soon abandoned in favor of ballerinas and the nude bather. It was Manet, T. J. Clark seems to believe, who, seven years after *L'Absinthe* (1875–1876), and especially in *A Bar in the Folies Bergère* (1882), breaks from this puppet-master 'classism'.

³ Here are few of my favorites: *La La at the Cirque Fernando, Paris* (1879); *The Nurse* (1872–1873); *The Pedicure* (1873); *Singer with a Glove* (1878); *Lowering the Curtain* (1880); *The Box at the Opera* (1880); *Before the Race* (1882).

⁴ It was very unpopular and even unsellable after it was first displayed, Sue Roe explains in her *The Private Lives of the Impressionists* (2006). It is still unpopular.

1876). I'll argue that, rather than acting simply as a commentary on social predicaments, such as loneliness or alcoholism or the alienation of the Parisian poor, *L'Absinthe* exemplifies Degas' persistent interest in the slice-of-life and in the emotions, waiting, especially that may go with it (Figure 1).⁵

Figure 1. Edgar Degas, *L'Absinthe/Dans un café/Au café*, 1875–1876. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. WikiArt.com



The tableau, of a gloomily inebriated young woman, the absinthe drinker, and her serious faced, middle-aged pimp-like companion drinking something brown and less potent, was posed for by Degas' friends, the actress Ellen Andrée and the painter, printmaker, and writer, Marcellin Desboutin.⁶ It's hard to tell what time of day it is in their dreary looking café (La Nouvelle Athènes in Place Pigalle, a venue popular with artists and intellectuals). There's light reflected in the mirror behind the pair of drinkers coming from elsewhere in the room. Daylight? There

⁵ Werner Hofmann in his *Degas: A Dialogue of Difference*, attributes the notion of the "slice-of-life" to Degas' work especially, but also to the other impressionists. The notion of the 'slice-of-life' derives from the critic Edmond Duranty, "who identified what was new in *La nouvelle peinture* (1876) [p. 45] as being the natural 'slice of life' element" (2007, p. 98). This critic is painted in Degas' *Edmond Duranty* (1879).

⁶ Sue Roe states that, for the staging of the painting, the brown drink was tea (2006).

are other people in the café. Marcellin Desboutin is watching something, probably someone off to his left. Ellen Andrée is not watching anything much. The dangerous absinthe appears to have dulled her completely. The painting is sometimes said to represent social criticism of the alcoholism of the poor.⁷ It's occasionally said to echo visually the social criticism of alcohol made by Emile Zola (1840–1902) in his novel, *L'Assommoir* (1877, apparently published as a serial in 1876).⁸ Zola was an acquaintance of Degas. Part of the argument of Zola's novel is to denounce the destruction of the poor caused by alcoholism.⁹ This could make the two characters in the tableau, *L'Absinthe*, Zola's Gervaise and Copeau, the husband and wife brought low by alcohol in his novel.¹⁰ The potent but popular drink absinthe is mentioned in *L'Assommoir*.¹¹

Can the young woman in the double-subject *L'Absinthe* be characterized as waiting, in the emotional sense of expectation, the one that I have been using? People who are waiting are often depicted in pairs. This is the case here, even if the male companion (and he is that—look at the closely positioned glasses) is placed off-centre in the canvas and even if he is not communicating with the young woman.¹² What is she waiting for? The next drink, you could say. For someone (perhaps her companion) to speak to her? For something interesting to happen? To go home from the dull looking café and get a sleep? Or perhaps, at worst, she's waiting for her pimp-like companion to put her back to work? No doubt the potent absinthe has dimmed her capacity for expectation, hence for waiting. It happens with drunkenness, I believe. But the expectation is never completely dimmed, not unless you have passed out. I consider, however, that if we were tempted to understand the young woman's possible role as a prostitute in company with her pimp (he looks more like a pimp than a companion or husband), then the importance of waiting becomes clear. And there too resides the social criticism, as I have indicated. But it's this emotion of waiting that offers the critical focus.

2. Waiting (2): Dega's *Waiting* (1880–1882) Compared to His *L'Absinthe* (1875–1876)

If what I've just said doesn't convince you of the importance of the emotion of waiting for the understanding of Edgar Degas' *L'Absinthe*, look with me at the next image. This is Degas' pastel, *Waiting (L'Attente)* (1880–1882). It's also a double-subject (Figure 2).

⁷ Sue Roe (2006) also speaks of the link to alcoholism in the painting.

⁸ And compare Edmond de Goncourt's story of the poverty and prostitution of a young woman in *La Fille Elisa* (1877). See Jacques Bouret, *Degas* (1965).

⁹ The Oxford World's Classic paperback translation of Zola's novel (2021) has this painting on its cover.

¹⁰ Degas is sometimes said to have been inspired by another of Zola's novels, *Terese Racquin* (1867). Degas' painting (1868–1869) embodying this inspiration is known as *Interior (Intérieur)* and also as *The Rape (Le Viol)*. The 1878 version of the Zola's book was illustrated by Pierre-Auguste Renoir, apparently, though these days it's his contemporary Degas whose paintings often grace the paperback copies of the book.

¹¹ Maybe in connection with Gervaise's husband, Copeau, but not, as I recall, in connection with Gervaise herself, though she did end up a destructive drinker. Perhaps we should be careful, for these reasons, in making a link between the novel and the painting. It might be more helpful to see the pair in the *L'Absinthe* as a young prostitute and her older pimp. If there is social criticism it may be levelled at this exploitive relationship. Sue Roe (2006) links the mood of the painting to the six-month imprisonment of Degas' brother.

¹² Waiting is based on pairs, in most cases, especially in art. See my *Hold On: The Life Science, and Art of Waiting* (Toohey, 2020).

Figure 2. Edgar Degas, *Waiting (L'Attente)*, 1880–1882. 48.2 x 61 cm. Norton Simon Museum at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Pasadena, Los Angeles. WikiArt.com



There's an emotional story in Degas' pastel, entitled *Waiting*, and it concerns the experience of waiting. The ballerina is waiting to go on stage to perform, or perhaps she is waiting for an audition for a ballet corps or just waiting for a rehearsal. The chaperone, seated on the very center of their stool, is waiting for the very same events. Is she there just to protect the young dancer or is she waiting to egg her on?¹³ In *Waiting*, it's the pairing that makes the picture unmistakably about waiting and about the future and the past of the two players in this tableau. It's the pairing that hints at the story behind the picture. If either of the characters were seated on their own, but in the same posture, you really wouldn't know what was going on. The chaperone, seated solo, might as well be angrily depressed or impatient. The ballerina, seated on her own, might just be rubbing her sore ankles and hoping for some relief from their pain.

How does Edgar Degas' pastel, *Waiting*, become such a study in waiting? The chaperone, older but not too old, is the key. When Edgar Degas pairs the two women he aims to highlight the future and the past for both characters. When we look at the two women in the pastel it's hard not to think, "ah, the life of the chaperone – that's what the young ballerina is really waiting for!" She doesn't know or feel that yet. Her innocence towards aging and to the passing of time makes the chaperone's victimhood all the more evident. But one day the young woman will probably be a chaperone too, the painting is saying, and she'll be looking back at those sore ankles and wishing that she could have them too. How long will she have to wait for this to happen? In fifteen or twenty years maybe, if the young ballerina is unlucky, she will be a chaperone too. That's the waiting the pastel's title refers to.

¹³ Richard Thomson's book on this painting is *Edgar Degas: Waiting* (1993). I've also discussed it in my book, *Hold On* (Toohey, 2020). Eunice Lipton has a chapter on the social status of young women such as our ballerina in *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (1986).

And the chaperone? What is she waiting for now that she's past her dancing prime? Perhaps this will be the second-hand pleasure of the young woman's success. Or perhaps it's just the end of her assignment with the young dancer. The pairing might also offer another answer to this question and it's one that relates to time. You could almost say that the chaperone and the ballerina wait in different ways and that this relates to their experience of time. Time must drag for the older woman. Her dancing days are past. She's not so old. But it's all about the triumphs of someone else now. That's what the passing of time brings with it. Time must race for the younger woman as she waits tensely and with arousal waiting to perform. Her glory days are all to come, she must hope. She must be nervous but at the same time excited. The comparison with the chaperone makes this all the clearer.

Let's return to *L'Absinthe* and try to see how the ideas behind the pastel *Waiting* can help us better to understand *L'Absinthe* as a painting about the emotion of waiting. But consider first the shared structure and some of the shared phenotypical details prominent in both images. There are two people sitting on a bench in front of a nondescript background in both representations and in both one figure is moved to the centre—the absinthe drinker and the chaperone.¹⁴ The other figure is pushed to the edge of the picture. The person in the centre assumes most of our attention. Feet are unexpectedly prominent in both works. In both the feet of the younger person are set toes outward. The older people in both wear black shoes. They also wear black clothing while the younger people are in light clothing. The pairs in both representations seem to ignore one another. There is a stark contrast in age between the figures in both paintings. In *L'Absinthe* the male figure is aged in his early fifties (Marcellin Desboutin, the male model for the painting, was born in 1823). The young woman is aged about twenty (Ellen Andrée, the female model for the painting, was born in 1857). The absinthe drinker is young enough to be the man's daughter. In *Waiting* the ballerina is about thirteen, while the chaperone looks to be in her early thirties. Without the second person in *Waiting* and in *L'Absinthe* you'd be hard pressed to diagnose the waiting.

And the ideas and themes of the two representations? How do these relate to waiting? Age seems to bring with it control, for better or worse. The chaperone is in charge of the ballerina, at least socially, and the putative pimp runs the prostitute's life. In this sense age seems to coerce the expectation of youth. Age brings loss for the chaperone and for the pimp. What are they waiting for? It is very hard to imagine there are any triumphs left for the pair. Youth, in the case of the two young people in these images, seems to be facing a future of loss, though it should not be so. It is absinthe for the prostitute and a hint of failure for the ballerina (she'll be a chaperone too). Time seems to be important for both the young and the old in both pictures. You'd say it races for the ballerina (more anticipation than expectation), drags for the pimp, and, thanks to the alcohol, almost ceases to exist for the absinthe drinker. So it is that expectation as well as waiting that appears to be at the very heart of the experience limned for each of these four characters. It seems to be left only for the young ballerina to have something that looks with positive hope to

¹⁴ Degas does not have so many pictures in which there are just two people. Here are some examples (but not all) of the same or at least the similar technique of two figures used in a Degas painting: *Dancers Resting* (1879, 1896, and (1898); *Two Ballet Dancers* (1879); *Young Women Resting in a Field* (1882); *Red Stocking* (1884); and *Two Dancers at Rest* (1896).

the future. How much is expectation left for her chaperone? Degas seems to imply that there is not much. The putative pimp? Does he even care? The young woman in his company? The look on her face seems to suggest that she has none, though this might be as much the result of the absinthe as it could be the result of a blighted life.

3. Édouard Manet's Reaction to *L'Absinthe* (1875–1876): *La Prune (Plum Brandy)* (1877), A Painting about Boredom

It has taken a long time to reach this point. It's here, in the company of the young absinthe drinker, where we will find not just the emotions of waiting and expectation but also the link with boredom. Look now at the next picture. It can tell us something about Degas' choices in *L'Absinthe*. *La Prune (Plum Brandy)* (1877) is by Degas' occasionally close friend Édouard Manet (1832–1883) and it was completed about one year after *L'Absinthe*.¹⁵ The model in the frame here is usually said to be again Ellen Andrée, the young woman in *L'Absinthe*.¹⁶ *La Prune* is sometimes said to have been composed in response to *L'Absinthe*.¹⁷ Manet appears to have seen boredom in Degas' *L'Absinthe*, I'm going to suggest, and this is why he offers in *La Prune* an image of the individual in the bored posture she has adopted (Figure 3).

If you really want to see a person in a traditional bored posture, then you have it in *La Prune*.¹⁸ The boredom we'll view here is of the simple sort—an emotion of mild frustration produced by temporarily unavoidable and predictable circumstances.¹⁹ Here in *Plum Brandy* we have an unalloyed phenotype or even a trope for boredom. But before I tell you how, let me say that the young woman is left-handed. Why? Most smokers prefer to smoke using their dominant hand. The woman's cigarette is in her left hand. And most drinkers prefer to hold their drink in their dominant hand—not just drinkers of alcohol. The woman's plum brandy stands near to her left hand. What does this dexterity have to do with boredom? The posture in the painting is one that is used often in visual representations of boredom. The head rests on the hand with the elbow

¹⁵ Álex Vicente (2023), reviews the Manet/Degas exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris (March 27–July 23, 2023). He emphasizes the link between *L'Absinthe* and *La Prune*. The Manet/Degas exhibition moved from Paris to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (September 24, 2023–January 7, 2024) (Sansom, 2023). The book of the exhibition is *Manet/Degas* (Wolohojian and Dunn, 2023). Sebastian Smee's *The Art of Rivalry* (2017) also discusses the rivalry between Degas and Manet. This type of relationship also has been dealt with in the recent exhibition in 2025 at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco concentrating on Manet and his friend, Berthe Morisot (Boucher, 2025).

¹⁶ Sue Roe (2006) states that the young woman is not Ellen Andrée, but rather Henriette Hausser (Citron), the mistress of the Prince of Orange.

¹⁷ Sansom (2023) reproduces a juxtaposed image the two paintings.

¹⁸ If you'd like to see another representation of a prostitute waiting for a customer, there is also Degas' *Woman in a Café* (1877), from the same year as *La Prune* (1877). Is this Degas trying to trump his friend's *La Prune*?

¹⁹ I'm offering a description, not a definition, which, to follow Eastwood et al. (2012, p. 482), would be something like this: a feeling “of wanting, but being unable, to engage in satisfying activity”. Now that might tell us about how Ellen Andrée feels, but it doesn't describe her. John Eastwood, the clinical psychologist from York University in Toronto, and the author with University of Waterloo psychologist, James Danckert, of *Out of My Skull* (2020), a recent book on boredom, link the emotion to ‘unused cognitive potential’.

on the table. The dominant hand is usually left free to fiddle with things.²⁰ So it is here, and the woman's left hand, her dominant hand, holds a cigarette and her drink is close to that left hand. Let's also look at her eyes. This sort of a phenotypical gaze is often called the twelve-foot stare in the ten-foot room—the eyes stare off into the near distance.²¹ It's also called the Artic stare and it's very common at work meetings when people become bored. You've probably done this yourself. It's a gaze that seems to go beyond the confines of a room. It is often linked with boredom, and it is also often paired with the head on the hand and the elbow on the table.²²

Figure 3. Édouard Manet, *La Prune (Plum Brandy)* c. 1877. Oil on canvas, 74 x 50 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington. WikiArt.com



Perhaps what Manet is saying to his friend, Edgar Degas, is that he should have had the absinthe drinker (the 20-year-old Ellen Andrée in both cases and, within the paintings, a prostitute in both cases) look like this. She must be bored, after all, if she is stuck in a dull café with a dull man. Could Manet also be saying in *La Prune* that it would have been better to use the well-known tropes for boredom, such as appear in his painting? If Manet is right to see boredom in *L'Absinthe*, he appears to be saying that a representation of boredom is best achieved using the traditional body posture that is associated, often in art and often enough in real life,

²⁰ The same posture is used traditionally to indicate melancholy or depression, but then the dominant supports the head, and the gaze is always cast downwards. You can view this at great length in Jean Clair's *Mélancolie: Génie et folie en Occident* (2005).

²¹ I discuss some of these visual elements of boredom with more detail on painting and photography in "Is It a Good Thing to Be Bored?" (Toohey, 2019).

²² You can read about this version and see in it my *Boredom: A lively History* (Toohey, 2011).

with boredom. Degas, however, wanted to do it his own way and to show us a different form of boredom. And so, he let the waiting situation do the talking for him and to show us something new and different.

4. Boredom Again, Using the Same Posture as Manet's *La Prune*: Degas' *Woman Leaning on Her Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* (1865)

Here is another reason why Degas might not have wanted to adopt the traditional phenotypes relating to the bored person in *L'Absinthe*. He'd already used them to depict boredom twelve years before *L'Absinthe*. This is in his 1865 painting *Woman Leaning on her Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* (sometimes called *Woman with Chrysanthemums*) reproduced below (Figure 4). Of this well-to-do woman the Met (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) catalogue suggests, on its website, she "is probably the wife of the artist's schoolboy friend Paul Valpinçon; Degas immensely enjoyed outings to their country house, Ménil-Hubert, and the dahlias, asters, and gaillardias in the bouquet would suggest a late summer visit". Perhaps it might not have been good form to attribute an emotion displayed by his middle-class friend, Madame Valpinçon to the absinthe drinker?

Figure 4. Edgar Degas, *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* (1865). Oil on canvas, 74 x 93 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. WikiArt.com



In *L'Absinthe* (1875–1876) and in *Waiting* (1880–1882) Degas builds his pictures around a contrast between two individuals, the so-called double-subject. In the former, it is between the prostitute and the pimp. In the later it is between the ballerina and her chaperone. In *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* (1865) there is a contrast between the huge,

exuberant, and fertile vase of flowers and Madame Valpinçon—the vase of flowers is larger than the woman (which has led some to suggest Madame Valpinçon was added as an afterthought to the painting) (Hofmann, 2007). But she is bored.²³ Look at her posture.²⁴ It mirrors that of the prostitute in *La Prune* (c. 1877). Her head leans against her left hand, while her arm rests on the tabletop. And her gaze is elsewhere, in the Artie manner. She’s carelessly abandoned her gloves, worn to protect her hands, by the water jug. Lastly, we should emphasize that she is alone. Waiting seems to come in pairs, in art and in life, while boredom tends to the solitary. Why is Madame Valpinçon bored? I can’t tell you. Does it have something to do with the large array of flowers, and a dull feeling that no human can compete in beauty with these? One of my friends has suggested that her posture (her phenotype) may indicate depression. The flowers work as a sort of a *memento mori*. But I think it’s just boredom: despite all the flowers, despite a life that enables her to gather them, she is still bored. (Look at her mouth as well as her eyes). The theme of boredom is a frequent subject in Degas’ art, but it is usually what is termed simple or situational boredom.²⁵ Degas, I believe, was aiming to represent something different with boredom in *L’Absinthe* and it is based on frustrated expectation, in addition to waiting and boredom. No need here, therefore for the typical bored posture that we’ve just seen in Manet and with Madame Valpinçon.

5. Comparing the Three Women

If you look at the three figures together, as I juxtapose them below (Figure 5), it’s perhaps simpler to see how they resemble one another—but also how Degas in *L’Absinthe* seems to have offered us a different way of looking at boredom by combining it with waiting and with frustrated expectation.

The links between Degas’ *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* and Manet’s *La Prune* are, I believe, apparent: the hats, the slight hunch of the shoulders, being seated at a table, hold the three paintings together, but the two women on the left both exhibit a leftward tilt of the heads, upcast eyes, and heads leaning on the right hands with the elbow on the table. These two paintings display what we’ve seen as the phenotypical tropes for simple boredom. The absinth drinker on the other hand, has her arms, almost despondently, by her side and her head tilted forward, and so too her gaze. The gaze is downward directed and cuts absinth drinker off from any others who might be in *La Nouvelle Athènes*. There is the main difference—and of course she is not seated alone, although we cannot see that here.

²³ Sebastian Smee (2017, p. 136) thinks it’s “self-absorption”. The hand is “lifted hesitantly to the corner of the mouth”. No boredom though.

²⁴ There is a pencil drawing from 1865 of just the head of the woman in this painting, adopting the same posture. No flowers, however. The painting is entitled *Portrait of Madame Paul Valpinçon*.

²⁵ A few examples: the pastel, *Portrait of a Woman Wearing a Green Blouse* (c. 1884); *In a Laundry* (c. 1884); *Woman Brushing Her Hair* (1889); *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1894); *Combing the Hair* (1895) (red) = *Woman Having Her Hair Combed* (1892–1895); and *Combing the Hair* (c. 1892–1895 and 1896–1900).

Figure 5. Edgar Degas, *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* (detail, 1865); Édouard Manet, *La Prune* (detail, c. 1877); Edgar Degas, *L’Absinthe* (detail, 1875–1876). The 20-year-old Ellen Andrée, the model, appears in the paintings centre and right



There’s enough resemblance between the absinthe drinker and the women of *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* and *La Prune* to be able to link them, emotionally speaking, together. There is as well enough of the bored posture in the absinthe drinker to be able to guess that boredom of some sort is at issue in *L’Absinthe*. But that’s not the whole story. Her posture and gaze really are different. Can the young woman in the *L’Absinthe* be characterized as waiting or waiting as well as bored and perhaps even waiting without expectation? Waiting first: people who are waiting are often depicted in pairs (and she has a companion in this picture). What is she waiting for? I’ve already suggested it could be for the next drink, for someone to speak to her, for something interesting to happen, or to go home from La Nouvelle Athènes and sleep. Or perhaps she’s waiting for her pimp to put her back to work. Boredom second: the potent absinthe has dimmed and frustrated her capacity for expectation. But you might say her very life has dimmed her expectations. Her representation blends waiting with boredom and frustrated expectation.

Single emotions, if they really exist as unitary entities, tend to blend with others, perhaps like many illnesses. They are multivalent constructs and so it is in *L’Absinthe*. Krystal Marlier, who works on ancient medicine and psychology, has explained this notion of multivalence more fully to me in a personal communication:

Emotions are complex multicomponent phenomena: evolutionarily automated programmes involving hard-wired autonomic and motor systems, yet also culturally scripted, linguistically framed, and cognitively appraised. While they have an established biological seat, their expression is historically contingent and varies with sociocultural conditions, political structures, religious doctrines, and prevailing moral values.²⁶

²⁶ Krystal Marlier once more: “The phrase ‘emotions as a multicomponent process’ was used by Scherer in 1984, and I have employed it here because not only is it a well-established framework, but it succinctly captures his claim

You can see just a little of this in *L'Absinthe*, with its multicomponent blend of waiting, frustrated expectation, and boredom. But not so much so in Manet's *La Prune* where what we view is mainly the phenotypical trope for boredom. The same could be said for Degas' *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers*. Here trope and cliché tend to get the better of things. There is no sense of frustrated expectation in these two paintings. It more resembles Andreas Elpidorou's anticipation.

6. Epilogue

I've suggested that the emotions of waiting, and boredom, and frustrated expectation are especially important for an understanding of Degas' *L'Absinthe*.²⁷ Perhaps it is a measure of the strength and of the fascination that abides in *L'Absinthe* that it allows this range of understandings. I don't believe that this is the case for Degas' earlier work, *Waiting* or *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers*. Nor is this the case for Manet's *La Prune*. And in Degas' *Waiting* the range of emotion is all there in its title. In Degas' *Woman Leaning on an Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers* or Manet's *La Prune* the focus is on boredom and on expectation, but not of a frustrated sort. There follows for Degas' slice-of-life painting *L'Absinthe* an unusual outcome. Is it possible that, because of this frustrated expectation, Degas renders a vision of what is sometimes termed complex or existential boredom? It is perhaps more popular in the century after Degas, but the *mal du siècle*, to give it a French name, was entrenched in Paris in the later second part of the 19th century. Elena Carrera (2023), recently, is helpful on this matter.²⁸ She links Zola's novel *Nana* (1880) and its protagonist, the high-class prostitute Nana to this tradition. Nana also appears towards the end of *L'Assommoir* (1876–87) whose connection to *L'Absinthe* has already been mentioned. Nana, of whom Manet offered a painting in 1877, began her life in poverty, as must have done Degas' absinthe drinker. Could it be that the artist's model, Ellen Andrée embodies an emotional state that resembles some of Nana's emotional world and embodies something as well that is closer to the literary versions of existential boredom in the 20th century—a condition that resembles a powerful feeling of emptiness and isolation in which a person may feel a persistent interest in and difficulty with concentrating on their current interests.²⁹ If that is the case then we might say once again that Degas' *Woman Leaning on an*

that every emotion episode displays five interrelated subcomponents: cognitive (appraisal), neurophysiological (bodily symptoms), motor expression (facial and vocal expression), motivational (action tendencies), and subjective feeling (emotional experience)" (see Scherer, 2005).

²⁷ Boredom and waiting are easily confused—then in the 19th century and now still in the 21st century. See, again, Elpidorou (2020) on boredom and waiting, but just on waiting, Toohey (2020).

²⁸ "Zola's *Nana* (Zola, 1880), in which the crowds of Paris become weary, disgusted with life, and eventually 'succumb to feelings of dullness and stupor', to the apathy that had come to be seen as the *mal-du-siècle* (Rossi, Jandl, Knaller, Schönefellner and Trockner Rossi, 2018, p. 286). Zola's protagonist, Nana, ends up feeling the emptiness which results from the constant fulfilment of desires: 'Yet, in the midst of her luxury, in the midst of that court, Nana was bored to death [*s'ennuyait à crever*]. She had men with every minute of the night, and money everywhere, even in the drawers of her dressing-table amongst her combs and brushes; but that no longer satisfied her, she felt a void somewhere, a vacancy that made her yawn. Her life rolled on unoccupied, bringing each day the same monotonous hours' (Zola, 1922, p. 276, Reference Zola, 1880, p. 354)" (Carrera, 2023, available online).

²⁹ Carrera (2023) again: "Using the categories proposed by the sociologist Martin Doehlemann (1991), scholars now tend to distinguish between the 'situational' and 'existential' forms of boredom (Svendsen [*A Philosophy of Boredom*], 2005; Toohey, 2011)".

Elbow beside a Vase of Flowers and Manet's *La Prune* focus is on what is 'situational' or 'simple' boredom.

Or maybe not. The boredom linked with the *mal du siècle* is associated particularly with the better off—or with bohemian intellectuals (compare Degas' c. 1880–1884 painting, *Portrait of Mary Cassat* at National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC). Am I wrong to see an irritable boredom, a version of *mal du siècle*, in the face and posture of the well-off American impressionist artist, Mary Cassat? Her posture resembles the trio in the previous section too. But there's no waiting without expectation in this painting. Does something as fashionable as *mal du siècle* ever penetrate into the world of a person such as the absinthe drinker and her companion? Wouldn't such an intrusion require the free time and the money of a Nana or of her aristocratic admirers? If that's the case, and it is surely correct, then what is the absinthe drinker experiencing? Bored, to be sure, but that combined in equal measure with waiting without expectation? So, a complex boredom?³⁰ Or should we not worry about a nomination?

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³⁰ I think so. Not simple, nor existential boredom. You can find complex (and profound boredom) discussed *passim* in Josefa Ros Velasco's *The Disease of Boredom: From Ancient Philosophy to Modern Psychology* (2026; this is a revised version of Ros Velasco's *La enfermedad del aburrimiento*, 2022). For this essay, Ros Velasco's most helpful chapter for me is "Metaphors and Clinical Cases of Boredom as a Disease" (Chap. 4).

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