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## Painters and Their Works – As Featured in Popular Literature

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**Abstract:** Painters and their biographies as well as their works and their “secret messages” and circumstances of their creation seem naturally predisposed to catch the interest of all sorts of writers. This article presents an array of painting-inspired motifs and plots which have featured prominently in literary works over the past decade. Among the dominant themes there are murder mysteries and the interplay between artists and the people surrounding them, their models obviously being given the place of honour.

**Keywords:** art, literature, painters, paintings, artist

**The modern literature seeks protagonists** who are as much credible as fascinating. As a result it often features real historical figures whose biographies tend to be incomplete or obscure. The mysteriousness of the past centuries complements the ambiguity which shrouds old paintings. This secretive art, as painting is viewed by the modern man, is commonly seen as only meant for the chosen ones – both artists and fans. No wonder then that for almost a decade (and definitely since 2003 when Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* came out) old masters, their paintings, and sometimes descendants, disciples or models have been given another life - in popular fiction (thriller-adventure, detective) and, less often, literary fiction. Among the protagonists there are such masters as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Hieronymus Bosch (born Jeroen Anthoniszoon van Aken), Rembrandt (full name Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn), Jan (Johannes) Vermeer van Delft, and also less known artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Pieter van Huys.

The fascination with the old masters stems from the interest in art being mystery, while the interest in artists’ lives and relationships provides a glimpse of the epoch’s mentality and atmosphere. This “past century” factor is so desirable, because it points to a specific time in history which has acquired a mythical air. The painter’s figure is begotten by the writer’s imagination and, as a result, it dwells on the borderland between reality and fiction. The purpose of such an approach to protagonist construction is to revitalise not only an authentic figure but art itself as well. Consequently, art is no longer “distant” and “elitist” and locked up in museums, but it becomes “real life”, a creative process taking place “here and now” in front of the viewer’s eyes. Thus the duality of the masterpiece: not only does it give an account of the epoch or talent, but it also expresses the passion and love of beauty. Because in literary fiction art remains shrouded in mystery (the titles of some of the novels address this issue directly), the protagonists’ interests centre on it. In Arturo Perez-Reverte’s *The Flanders Panel*, a painting conceals a crime mystery – not only in its symbolism but also in the game of chess it depicts. The meticulously presented aspects of the masterpiece call on the reader’s imagination and sensitivity, showing the painting and the persons in it, as it were, in 3D.

However, it should be noted that although Pieter van Huys, Flemish painter, referred to in Perez-Reverte's book, is a real historical figure, the plot is set in a time after the painter's death (or before he was born). The use of a real personage enables the author to combine the factual with the fictional, making the fictional events assume an air of likelihood. Besides, the available information on van Huys is so scant that neither his output nor his life is widely known.

A masterpiece contains in itself an elaborately coded secret message which can only be decoded by somebody with specific knowledge. Thus the double nature of the work of art: it contains both the perceptible and the hidden. In Perez-Reverte's *The Flanders Panel*, van Huy's painting seemingly only shows two men playing chess and a woman accompanying them, but in fact it also discloses the murderer – it is a record of a perfect murder, whose motif was known solely to the painter. In Peter Dempf's *Caravaggio's Legacy*, the painterly vision of the eponymous protagonist is materialised in a painting showing John the Baptist's death. The masterpiece is a record of a murder committed by the artist himself: the biblical scene is a form of self-accusation and expiation – or even of exorcising the past. Caravaggio comes to terms with the past, but does so secretly – the whole thing is hidden from the neutral viewer (the figures in the painting have faces of the artist's friends and relatives). Only the initiated stand a chance of deciphering the artistic code. It should be mentioned that the plot's construction rests on the idea that the severed heads painted by Caravaggio are in fact self-portraits. Drawing on this idea, Dempf tells a story of incestuous love, murder, and lack of forgiveness which make the painter create this macabre masterpiece. Numerous hypotheses have been created to explain why the severed heads bear semblance to Caravaggio, but one thing is certain: "in his lifetime [...], he painted a dozen or so severed heads, some of them [...] being self-portraits, but this does not say much about what was going on in his mind. We can only be sure that this reflects some hidden suffering"<sup>1</sup> – which is exactly the motivation the reader finds in Dempf's book. The mystery of the nightmarish self-portraits is thus given new interpretation and the literary biography of Caravaggio is supplemented with the details of a murder he committed – never discovered, yet forever filling him with remorse<sup>2</sup>.

The motif of coding a dangerous truth is also brought on in *The Da Vinci Code*: a masterpiece conveys the desire to reveal the hidden secret of humanity. A masterpiece by da Vinci contains an unsettling mystery "obviously debunking Christ's divinity"<sup>3</sup>. The idea of plastic arts being a chronicle of truth has become a fixed motif in popular literature, expressed explicitly in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, Peter Dempf's *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch* or *The Mystery of Bosch* by Yves Jègo and Denis Lèpée. The record of the artist's career involves recording all secrets big and small of the long-gone world and informs the reader that art always remains a mystery and at the same time it reflects the truth about the existence of man and reality. Naturally, Hieronymus Bosch is a mysterious figure not only because of his unique artistic output, but also due to the scarcity of his biographical data. That is why the facts about him can easily be combined with fiction. The esotericism and grotesqueness of his works make them a mystery to the viewer. Their rich and dense

<sup>1</sup> D. Seward, *Caravaggio: A Passionate Life* Trans. R. A. Galos: "Caravaggio. Awanturzik i geniusz". Wrocław 2003, p. 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> The murder of his sister's boyfriend, his incestuous relationship with her resulting in her giving birth to his daughter.

<sup>3</sup> K. T. Toeplitz, *O czym świadczy kod da Vinci*, <http://www.lewica.pl/index.php?id=11293> accessed on March 16, 2009, p.2

symbolism allows one to inscribe new content upon them, to put in coded information inaccessible to the uninitiated. Dempf faced a similar task while writing *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch*, recalling the dispute over the source of Bosch's inspiration. "The Garden of Earthly Delights", one of Bosch's best known and at the same time most unusual and ambiguous works is of special interest to the writer. The triptych's title refers to the central panel, while the left one depicts paradise, and the right one – hell. The way the message is conveyed here is quite unique: Bosch's world teems with fantastic, sometimes monstrous, creatures; it is often said to twinkle semantically. In *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch*, the interpretation of the triptych gets a significantly different treatment: the painter, now in his old age, in order to execute the commissioned job, takes narcotic drugs to enhance his visions – the result being the central and left panels of the triptych. Exhausted, he has problems painting the third, most difficult panel (hell). "It had gradually sucked the life out of me until only the bones and skin remained"<sup>4</sup> – so the artist turns for inspiration to his student, Petronius Oris, and his hallucinations. The right panel is clearly different from the other two: it is more dynamic, darker, and richer in macabre, grotesque details. The reality created by the painter depicts the strife between good and evil. The structure of the fictional world in Dempf's novel also correlates with this concept: it reflects to some extent the conviction that Bosch belonged (or at least sympathised with) the Adamites – which forms the basis of the main plot and the criminal subplot. "The Garden of Earthly Delights" is supposed to be a record of the Adamite idea, but "master Hieronymus, on the last (right) panel you deny everything that you have laid out in the other two – everything that the Adamites wanted to pass on to their descendants. Is cognition not destructive then?"<sup>5</sup>. Heretic ideology is shown as a destructive force acting upon both man and art: not only does it deny the way the world and faith exist, but it also undermines the sense and purpose of art.

An almost identical interpretation of the artist's work with regard to its alleged disclosure of the laws governing the world's existence (interestingly enough – existence of faith chiefly) one can find in *The Mystery of Bosch* by Yves Jègo and Denis Lèpée. Here, the painter's works serve as a pretext for sketching a conspiracy involving Vatican, The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, and the Kingdom of France. The way the artistic assets of Bosch's oeuvre are treated here may seem a touch macabre, since they are used as settings for scenes of torture, especially the strongly emphasised frequent motif of hybrid creatures – employed by the authors as one of the main components of the fictional world. However, they are trivialised: what is oneiric, understated, and unfathomable in Bosch's work only becomes a hotchpotch of dead bodies and animals. In this way a work of art is downgraded to an inspiration for murder, permanence metamorphoses into temporariness, and awe-inspiring beauty is reduced to a mere moment of trepidation.

Such a transformation also reflects the modern view that art only offers aesthetic pleasures, while its message or symbolism are beyond the average viewer's perceptive and intellectual powers. The artistic coding techniques of the past are incompatible with the modern viewer's "narrow" reception, in its scope extending from "nice" to "uninteresting". Higher echelons of meaning are of access only to those who – due their learning (like Langdon in Brown's book, Finn in Paul Christopher's *Michelangelo's Notebook*, Julia and Cèsar in *The Flanders Panel*) or close relationship with the artist (Nerina in Dempf's *Caravaggio's Legacy*, the student of

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<sup>4</sup> P. Dempf, *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch*. Transl. by A. Bender: "Tajemnica Hieronima Boscha". Warszawa 2005, p. 352

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. , p. 353

Bosch in Dempf's *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch*) – can see through the artist vision and make out much more than the composition on the canvas. For art is a dynamic matter, while “masterpieces [...] have in themselves something more which cannot be analysed exhaustively and which points to the OTHER – ultimately determining the work's fullest sense; it complements the work's total sense, made up of all the sense levels that can be distinguished in a work of art.”<sup>6</sup>

The biographies of old masters can too serve as background for modern thrillers, detective and adventure stories - and sometimes even regular novels as is the case with Susan Vreeland's *The Passion of Artemisia*. Here, the book is based on the biography of Artemisia Gentileschi, daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, fresco painter. The plot employs the motif of a rape committed on her by Agostino Tassi, her teacher, friend of her father's, and the suit she brought against him. The depiction of biographical elements is intertwined with a description of her creative passion and a careful analysis of feminine sensitivity which affects choices in life as well as artistic ones. Subjected to torture, humiliated by judges, Artemisia keeps her painting passion alive. She survives due to the power of her talent and eventually comes out the victor. The novel draws on true historical personages and events, while the daily life elements are in consonance with the concept of art as the manifestation of freedom and sacrifice at the same time.

A similar intention, it seems, is exemplified by Lynn Cullen, author of the novel titled *I Am Rembrandt's Daughter*. The eponymous heroine, extramarital child of the painter, has to take care of her father who - possessed by art - gradually succumbs to madness. An important structural element of the plot is the story of the creation of one of Rembrandt's most mysterious paintings – “The Jewish Bride”. It shows a young woman in a red dress accompanied by a man who holds his left hand around her shoulders (while his right hand rests on her chest). It is not known who the models were. In Cullen's novel, the painting is referred to as “Tenderest Love” by the protagonists and the models are one of Rembrandt's students and Rembrandt's daughter, Cornelia.

It should be mentioned that the theme and the unidentified models were also used by Luigi Guarnieri to construct the plot of a novel of the same title as Rembrandt's painting. In Guarnieri's literary interpretation, the pair in the painting are a physician and his patient, suffering from an unknown disease (Ephraim Paradies and Abigail Lopes da Costa). Their relationship is peculiar and laced with risk. In this case, too, the circumstances of the creation of a masterpiece determine its final shape, while the artist's intention is shown as an accidental conspiracy of circumstances. The mystery of the models' identity – in both Cullen and Guarnieri's books – is used to speculate about the story of fictional characters. This tendency to highlight the circumstances in which a work of art is created is combined with the desire to tell a story which is as fascinating as it is idealised (great unfulfilled love which becomes the painting's theme's background).

Uncovering the identity of a figure in a painting is also an element of the writer's play with the reader in Dempf's *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch*. An important development in the plot is the identification by the protagonist of the tree-man in the right panel of the triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Some researches believe it to be the painter's self-portrait,

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<sup>6</sup> W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna. Szkice z estetyki*. Kraków 2002, p. 267

but Dempf's interpretation differs: it is Jacob van Almaengien, a woman dressed up as a man – a murderer and a guardian of the Adamites' secrets and at the same time the driving force behind Bosch's most notorious work. Such a contrivance purposes to explain "the meaning of the melancholy expression on the white face [...] under a hat"<sup>7</sup>.

To the writer, the painter, thus, often becomes just a pretext for showing the world and events of his time – generally associated with conspiracies, secrets, clandestine societies, etc. This is the case with Dempf's *The Mystery of Hieronymus Bosch* whose protagonists, a student of the painter, living in the XVI c., and an art restorer in the modern times try to fathom out the message hidden in the triptych "The Garden of Earthly Delights". Like in Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, the secret hidden in the painting is a threat to the integrity and status of the Catholic Church. Considered one of the most unsettling pictures, "The Garden of Earthly Delights" is subjected to a literary analysis, and the observation oscillates between reality and fiction.

The mysterious inscriptions and signs in the old masters' paintings are likely to echo the idea of the old symbolism's illegibility. The abundance of connotations triggered by the paintings' imagery seems to point to an underlying code - to be deciphered only by specialists or the initiated. It often happens that the paintings' symbolism goes beyond the modern knowledge – it refers to the long-forgotten associations or signs. Thus the impression of some sort of coding going on. It should be stressed, that the writers' interest tends to be caught by chiefly Renaissance or Baroque works (or painters). The latter style – with its histrionic pathos, dynamic gestures, expressive chiaroscuro, juxtaposition of naturalist and decorative elements, sensuality and crudeness – is the incarnation of artists' most inscrutable concepts. The Renaissance painting, on the other hand, introduced symbolism going beyond the sphere of religion and proposed new aestheticism, characterised especially by love of detail. All these elements allow the work of art to become not only an autonomic record of the experience but also information – which is a direct consequence of the tendency to record the details of the external reality.

If a work of art functions as a mystery in a work of literary fiction, then the writer seems to be attracted to the artist's biography as the mystery's fullest manifestation. Dempf's novel, *Caravaggio's Legacy*, is constructed using fictitious persons and events as inlays in the real-event story. The main plot, however, is based on Caravaggio's biography – confirmed by legal deeds and accounts given by people who met him (the painter and his opponent, Baglione). The real historical events are: Caravaggio becoming a knight of Malta (he even signed as one of his paintings), his participation in a mysterious fight in Naples, dead woman model (a prostitute) shown as Mary in "The Death of the Virgin", and, above all, the murder of which Caravaggio was accused in Rome. In Dempf's novel, the painter's past is shown as shrouded in mystery; the author apparently favours a conspiracy against the painter (thriller-adventure plot), rather than the artist's rakishness - though the latter is more likely to correspond with the facts. An indispensable element of Caravaggio's literary biography are the moments when he painted his most fascinating works, for instance "The Death of the Virgin", shown as a study of madness and passion. The idea of a dead prostitute surrounded by living models attests the artist's creative madness – this is a vision as much macabre as

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<sup>7</sup> L. Ward, W. Steeds, *Demons – Images of Evil in Art*. Trans. E. Romkowska: „Demony. Wizje zła w sztuce.” Warszawa 2008, p. 149.

extraordinary. Circumstances in which this painting was created are adjusted by Dempf to suit Caravaggio's legend: a popular version of the events has the corpse of a prostitute called Lena (drowned in the Tiber) pose as a model for Virgin Mary. "The Death of the Virgin" shows "painful humanity of Virgin Mary whose hand resting on her belly [...] does not deny her redemption. Instead, it makes one contemplate the mystery of divinity in human form"<sup>8</sup>. However, the viewers "failed to see the contemplation of divinity and death – they only saw 'one of Ortaccio's scruffy harlots' exposing her bare feet and flatulent belly. Worse still, the model happened to be Cravaggio's mistress"<sup>9</sup>. In Dempf's novel, Caravaggio decides to immortalise his dead mistress in the commissioned painting, because her body initialises the creative process - it becomes an embryo of an artistic idea. It is worth mentioning that in the novel the grief-stricken young woman (Magdalene) in the foreground becomes the artist's friend, exhausted with posing and the painter's madness – and gets painted as such.

The record of the creative process and the models posing for the paintings are an important source of literary matter – for such writers as, among others, Tracy Chevalier – in her *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Susan Vreeland – *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (both novels deal with Vermeer's women models), Pierre La Mure – *The Private Life of Mona Lisa*, and Jeanne Kalogridis – *I, Mona Lisa*.

In contrast to the painters-and-their-works novels in the thriller-adventure convention stands Claus Cornelius Fischer's detective story *And Forgive Us Our Trespasses* in which Goya's paintings are used to illustrate the events taking place in the fictional world. The protagonist, Bruno van Leeuwen, detective police inspector, is an art lover. He seeks inspiration as well as relief in the works of the Spanish painter - whom he considers a superb expresser of the horrendous reality. According to the inspector, the truth about the world can be found in art - which reveals and visualises people's motives and actions. The sets of prints titled *Caprices* and *The Disasters of War* - and especially the commentaries accompanying the prints – complement the depressing atmosphere of the investigation conducted by the protagonist. The painter's role is equivalent to that of the inspector: both see and experience the others' sufferings and they are sort of responsible for the weak and vulnerable. The artist achieves justice through art, the inspector – uncovers the murderer. Both experience the trauma of other people's suffering and death. "Van Leeuwen was aware that on this Earth all kinds of death were possible. The same kind of death, however, never came twice – it could only be an echo of a previous one, a slightly or clearly different copy. Yet every death made no sense. This, he learnt from Goya. All the people died – whatever the cause they believed in – for nothing, for the black, disdainful *nada* – whether they were murdered or swept by a plague or killed by disease or died of famine. Their corpses were lowered into graves or caves, piled in heaps [...]. 'So, this is humanity', thought van Leeuwen"<sup>10</sup>. The atmosphere of despondency and nightmare is heightened by pictures of animals being slain – reminiscent of Goya's pictures. The plot of the novel is set in the time when BSE epidemic swept across Europe and the culls were being shown on television. Fischer clearly points to the similarity between reality and the painter's artistic vision, stating that "footage on TV deserved Goya's painterly interpretation"<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> H. Langdon, *Caravaggio*. Trans. S. Kroszczyński: "Caravaggio". Poznań 2003, p. 263

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 264

<sup>10</sup> C. C. Fischer *Und vergib uns unsere Schuld*. Trans. A. Rosenau: *I odpusć nam nasze winy*, Katowice 2008, p. 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 26

The world seen by the protagonist is one of darkness. The events in which he participates ultimately convince him of the humanity's moral collapse. Hence the reflection that Goya's painting is the only authentic record of man's experiences, highlighting man's cruelty and the nightmare of reality. To van Leeuwen, the painter's works are "sacred", because they show "man's true nature. No portraits of fat merchants – as the Flemish painters would have preferred it – no goldfinches or skaters [...]; instead – war, murders, and madness. But even that was no religion to the inspector, although his fondness of the Spanish painter – here, in Vermeer and Rembrandt's cosy homeland – bordered on heresy"<sup>12</sup>. Such a clear hint at the Flemish art and contrasting it with Goya's painting points to a pessimistic outlook on life, a loss of hope or trust in man. The purpose of the juxtaposition of a brutal murder with Goya's prints is to identify the mechanisms driving the world. Goya's going beyond the aesthetic principles of his epoch is matched in the novel by the violation of the accepted social norms through the removal of the victim's brain, the committed and alleged acts of cannibalism. The art's goal is to identify or uncover man's true nature. In Fischer's novel, uncovering the truth translates into the protagonist's search for contact with works of art which provide him with answers to the questions that vex him. To van Leeuwen, albums with Goya's prints confirm that the time and place may vary, but crime is unchanging – as are human motives, desires or dreams.

Painters' biographies are, after all, a uniquely rich source of inspiration not only due to their ambiguity: a similarly frequent motif is love and dedication to art. The traditional view has an artist commit to his passion entirely, forgetting his family, getting alienated, living in an unreal world. The artist's love of art determines the way he sees the world around and upsets the balance between reality and the realm of art, thus resulting in works of exceptional beauty. "The personality of the artist is recognisable: it is a 'filter' through which passes all the richness of the world he experiences in his very special way. As a result, the world is not portrayed 'calmly' – quite the contrary: the artist gets fully involved, discloses his attitudes and feelings roused by the experience"<sup>13</sup>. Similar approach is characteristic of popular literature's treatment of artists. It is shaped by catholic stereotypes concerning artists. The main driving force behind such stereotypes is the conviction that the artist is egoist by nature. Short-lived fascination with a woman model is often an indispensable determinant of successful artistic activity. Similar fascination drove Johannes Vermeer to paint his famous (and mysterious - due to the model's unknown identity) *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in Tracy Chevalier's novel under the same title. The subtle friendship that develops between the young maid, Griet, and the painter brings about the creation of an extraordinary work of art which becomes an expression of feeling which the two could not express otherwise. Entangled in relationships with people who could not understand their artistic passion, they cannot and do not want to express their mutual fascination. In Vermeer the feeling is channelled through artistic activity, while Griet, posing for the picture, overcomes her shyness. Their relationship comes to fruition in the form of the painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, a fine example of masterly use of chiaroscuro and colour. "The artist did manage to catch all the beauty that the human eye can see in shapes, hues, and the play of light. Yet, also, what is beyond the reach of sensory perception - what can only be sensed indirectly – is part of his elegant, superior artistry"<sup>14</sup>. The things ineffable profoundly affect the work's aesthetic value – "Vermeer

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 25-26

<sup>13</sup> W. Stróżewski, *Wokół piękna. Szkice z estetyki*. Kraków 2002, p. 305.

<sup>14</sup> M. W. Alpatov, *Historia sztuki. Renesans i barok*. Trans. M. Kurecka, W. Wirpsza, Warszawa 1968, p. 221

constantly worked on achieving sublime and subtle harmony”<sup>15</sup>. Posing is for Griet a substitute for physical union, especially obvious in the ear-piercing scene. The painful experience is necessary, because the artist’s wife’s pearl earrings are to become the keynote element of the composition. The model does not object, though she realises the inappropriateness of such an act. She cannot and does not want to rebuff Vermeer’s request. Deciding to embark on this painting, he says: “But I will not paint you as a maid. [...] I will paint you as I first saw you, Griet. Just you”<sup>16</sup>. The painting of the portrait is described as a laborious process, intimidating for Griet. “At first I could not meet his eyes. When I did it was like sitting close to a fire that suddenly blazes up. [...] I forced my gaze up to his eyes. [...] I endured it – he wanted me to”<sup>17</sup>. This original situation gets translated into a visual effect, for *Girl with a Pearl Earring* ever since its creation has won the highest accolades for its subtle beauty and the model’s mysteriousness<sup>18</sup>.

The relationship between the artist and the model may take on various forms, including mutual fascination or love, often being a phenomenal one of a unique character. Lynn Cullen seems to have had an intention to present a similarly multidimensional relationship in her *I Am Rembrandt’s Daughter*. The daughter in question, Cornelia, wishing to share artistic passion with her father, agrees to sit for a painting with one of her father’s students. The painter is the first to see the subtle bond between his daughter and his favourite student, so he has them pose together. He also makes constant allusions to Cornelis Suythof’s great affection for her – to make her become aware of it. Cullen models the two on real historical figures: Rembrandt’s daughter did marry Suythof. The couple left for Batavia in the Dutch West Indies and had two sons. However, the plot of the novel comes to an end in 1669, just after Rembrandt’s death.

The artist-and-model-relationship theme appears too in Barbara Corrado-Pope’s *Cézanne’s Quarry*, a literary portrait of the famous post-impressionist. Facts from Paul Cézanne’s life are intertwined with a criminal plot, while the writer’s interpretation of the relationship between Cézanne and Hortense Fiquet, his mistress, complements the painter’s story<sup>19</sup>. In Pope’s novel, the painter, at first reluctant to marry the mother of his son, after some dramatic events (having been accused of a murder, among other things), realises that Hortense is the love of his life. It is then that he paints her portrait, which, in the novel, he finds the best he has ever drawn: “On the right side of the paper sheet was Hortense’s portrait – the most beautiful of all he has ever drawn. [...] See - he said - you are my flower”<sup>20</sup>. The more he wants to express his most intimate feelings, the better his works become. As long as he does not realise how much he loves Hortense, he is unable to paint anything that would convey the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 223

<sup>16</sup> T. Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. HarperCollins, London 2000, p. 190

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> This painting is often called ‘Mona Lisa of the North’ or ‘Dutch Mona Lisa’, which directly implies its masterly execution and hints at its aura of mysteriousness. Little is known of the circumstances in which it was created. Researchers are puzzled by the artist’s unwillingness to paint portraits – so the identity of the model (some suggest it was his daughter) might shed light on the reason for which it was painted. In her novel, Chevalier proposes an explanation pointing to Vermeer’s emotional involvement – which could as well account for the extraordinary beauty of the canvas.

<sup>19</sup> Cézanne met Hortense Fiquet in 1869. For a long time he kept this relationship secret from his parents (especially father) – the more so after the birth of his son, Paul. The couple was only able to marry in 1886 when his father eventually gave his consent.

<sup>20</sup> B. Corrado-Pope, *Cezanne’s Quarry*. Trans. J. Hensel: „Kamieniolołm Cézanne’a”. Warszawa 2008, p. 282



power of his passion. At the same time his model “wanted to preserve this moment and always feel the warmth in which her heart melted”<sup>21</sup>. Such an idealised concept of art assumes that it is dependent on the artist’s mental state and that it reflects the artist’s personality, temper, and current emotions. It is the relationship between the artist and the model that causes what the former feels to be recorded in the picture. To a considerable extent this is consistent with Cézanne’s artistic strategy under which “he was able to combine objective study of nature with mathematical laws of harmony – the accidental with the eternal. This wonderful balance is a result of many years’ hard work. [...] Cézanne does not ‘record’ the realistic – instead he makes it reveal the variety of its forms of being now and manifesting itself in general”<sup>22</sup>. His work on Hortense’s portrait is a consequence of his enchantment with momentary beauty: it is the desire to catch and record a moment of great importance to him<sup>23</sup>.

A constituent element of the artist stereotype is also the conviction that the artist devotes himself entirely to art, while his love of other people takes a back seat. Literary biographies present the artistic passion as superior to emotional life. This is consistent with the traditional view which has artists become alienated and focused solely on their creative passion. Only the moments of crisis bring about significant upsetting of these proportions: “My art – what good of it? I’ve devoted all my time and all my love to it – everything I had – while my beloved ones lived their own lives. Now they’re gone and I’m left in nothing. With nothing”<sup>24</sup> - says Rembrandt in L. Cullen’s novel. His despair over his son’s death prompts him to view his life through the prism of constant loss. Indeed, his life was strewn with tragic events (according to André Malraux, “few lives suggest the effect of fate to such an extent”<sup>25</sup>): the deaths of his beloved first wife, Saskia, then - of a couple of his children, next - of Hendrickje Stoffels (his mistress), and finally – of his only son, Titus. Complemented with the painter’s bankruptcy and loss of popularity, all these have made his biography an inspiration for writers.

The mysteriousness and extraordinariness of Rembrandt’s paintings allow one to take personalised approach to many of them. The literary text therefore suggests that the reception of paintings is determined by personality factors, including the viewer, the model, and, above all, the artist.

One should note that the use of love and art as literary leitmotiv often stems from the assumption that there is a significant relationship between the painter and the model. In such a relationship the erotic aspect often takes over: posing for a portrait is seen as a very intimate activity, uncovering not only the body but the soul as well<sup>26</sup>. Such treatment this leitmotiv is

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 283

<sup>22</sup> M. & G. Blunden, J.-L. Daval, *Malarstwo impresjonistów*. Trans. M. Mieszalski, Warszawa 1994, p. 187

<sup>23</sup> *Nota bene* it is thought that Hortense Fiquet was Cézanne’s most patient model. Rumour had it that he did not treat his models well, so they were reluctant to pose for him. To some extent this is explained by his artistic strategy: he wrote to Charles Camoin that “studying and recreating the model takes sometimes a lot of time” (citation from *ibid.* p. 186).

<sup>24</sup> L. Cullen, *I Am Rembrandt’s Daughter*. Trans. G. Komerski: „Córka Rembrandta”, Warszawa 2008, p. 323

<sup>25</sup> A. Malraux, *Przemiana bogów. Nierzeczywiste*. Trans. J. Guze, Warszawa 1985, 261.

<sup>26</sup> A cognate motif was earlier presented by Edgar Allan Poe in his *The Oval Portrait* in which the woman model shown in the portrait “saw, and loved, and wedded the painter. He, passionate, studious, austere, and having already a bride in his Art.” Painting a portrait of his wife, the painter deprived her of *vis vitalis* – thus killing her. But the painting turns out to be an extraordinary one – for it gives off “Life itself”. A similar motif is found in *Cena Sztuki* / ‘The Price of Art’, a fantasy short story by the Polish writer Marcin Kryszczuk: here, both the woman model and the painter – who loves her – lose their souls.

found, for instance, in Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever* (the painter falls for his patron's wife) or Javier Sierra's *The Secret Supper* in which a painter who has taken a vow of chastity is seduced by a young woman posing for him. A similar motif is used by Jean-Daniel Baltassat in his *The Court Painter*<sup>27</sup>.

That popular literature so clearly embraces the art of painting makes one conclude that art in its every aspect stirs the writer's imagination - even if it only concerns the creative process or an episode in the artist's life. The sensational parts of biographies combined with the insufficient knowledge of artists' lives makes painters attractive literary characters. Caravaggio's boisterousness, Rembrandt's financial carelessness and family problems, Bosch's shocking expressiveness, Da Vinci's scientific and artistic versatility, the influencing power and uniqueness of Vermeer's portraits – all these have featured prominently in literature dealing with painters and their works.

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<sup>27</sup> The plot has Johannes van Eyck go to Portugal – on the Duke of Burgundy's orders - to paint a portrait of the infanta. The painter first has an affair with one of the ladies-in-waiting and then with the infanta.