

A Frozen Woman

La Femme gelée

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

Published in 1981, Annie Ernaux's *La Femme gelée* (*A Frozen Woman*) transforms the seemingly personal experiences of marriage and domestic life into a political issue. At a time when French materialist feminism was revealing domestic labour to be a structured relationship of exploitation rather than a natural feminine vocation, Ernaux provides a literary embodiment of the feminist idea that the personal is political. By recounting the gradual dispossession of a woman within everyday domestic life, she reveals the mechanisms through which a woman becomes what society expects her to be. The novel demonstrates that domination is not only exercised in workplaces, institutions, or legislation. It is also produced in kitchens, living rooms, and family routines.

La Femme gelée takes the form of a reversed Bildungsroman. Rather than narrating the progressive emancipation of a young woman, it reconstructs the process by which she becomes aware of her dispossession. The narrator grows up among strong working-class women, in a family where gender roles are relatively fluid, with her mother embodying independence, authority, and ambition. Nothing seems to predestine her to become what she later refers to as a "guardian of the hearth" (156). However, school, religion, romance novels, magazines, and cultural expectations gradually teach her that femininity means self-denial, pleasing others, and organising one's life around men. This process is inextricably linked to class: as the narrator 'ascends' to the intellectual bourgeoisie, the norms imposed on her become more demanding and more refined. In this social world, learning to be a woman also means learning to be respectable: controlling one's body, moderating one's voice and maintaining one's interior. Social success requires more than education and professional achievement; it demands conformity to bourgeois norms of domestic order, consumption, and respectability. The promise of fulfilment turns into a trap. "I have stepped into the picture, and it's killing me" (65), the narrator remarks. The image of happiness she has been taught to desire is revealed to be a form of confinement. Gender and class norms are not independent constraints; they reinforce and produce each other. What Ernaux describes is not an individual destiny but a socially organised process. It creates the "frozen woman".

The central theme of the novel is domestic labour. Ernaux records the endless succession of meals, shopping trips, laundry, childcare, and household management that defines the narrator's daily life. Unlike paid work, these activities leave no visible trace, produce no recognised value, and must constantly be started again. Their repetition fragments time, restricts space, and isolates the individual. While the narrator's husband accumulates qualifications, projects, and professional experience; she accumulates chores. This asymmetry also extends to space: he moves freely around the city, exploring it after work, while she moves through it along constrained itineraries mapped out by obligations. Domestic labour also escapes the categories through which value is usually measured: it is neither exchanged nor accumulated, leaves no identifiable product behind, and can never be completed. In response to this invisibility, Ernaux counts, lists, and quantifies:

“three hundred and sixty-five meals multiplied by two, nine hundred sessions with the frypan” (173). This produces a measure that neither economics nor mythology provides.

In order to expose this invisibility, Ernaux transforms the very form of the novel. Rather than organising experience around dramatic events, psychological revelations, or narrative resolution, she foregrounds inventories, repetitions, and seemingly insignificant details. “Laundry to be sorted, a shirt button to sew back on, an appointment at the pediatrician’s, we’re out of sugar. The inventory that has never moved or amused anyone”: this insistent enumeration replaces narrative logic with a logic of endless recurrence. The present tense and iterative imperfect create a temporality deprived of dynamism, in which impulses of revolt gradually subside and disappear. What is usually omitted from literature – the preparation of meals, the management of daily life, the cleaning of rooms – occupies centre stage. By doing so, Ernaux challenges the hierarchies that traditionally distinguish the important from the trivial and the political from the private.

The ending offers no liberation. Although the narrator understands the mechanisms that have produced her alienation, understanding alone does not dissolve them. As Ernaux herself observes about her reading of Beauvoir, “to have received the key to understanding shame does not give one the power to erase it.” The novel closes not on emancipation but on the image of a future self already frozen into the role she has inherited. Yet the book itself constitutes a form of resistance. By making visible what usually remains hidden, Ernaux turns domestic everyday life into an object of collective recognition and political analysis. The ‘I’ of *La Femme gelée* is never purely individual. Through it, the experience of countless women emerges, whose labour sustains social life while remaining unacknowledged.

With *La Femme gelée*, Ernaux inaugurates the literary project that would define her work: using writing to uncover the social structures embedded within lived experience rather than transforming it into fiction. By making domestic everyday life into an object of literary enquiry, she reveals that the private sphere is not outside of history or politics, but one of their most effective terrains.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing