

## ***Le Flâneur*: a Key Symbol of Cultural Appreciation in France**

When one thinks of France, a stereotype that often springs to mind is that of the relaxed French adult, taking their time and drinking wine during a long workday lunch break. In fact, there was even a recent report claiming that French president François Hollande cancelled a business lunch with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani over Rouhani's insistence that there not be wine served at this lunch (Gopnik 2016). Clearly, the idea of "enjoying life now [and] making the most of each day" is central to perceptions and realities of French culture (Rosenthal 1999, 900). In examining this cultural preference for taking one's time and finding joy in everyday events, the concept of the *flâneur* is important.

The verb *flâner* means to "stroll, saunter, laze about, amble, [or] idle" (Flâner - traduction - Dictionnaire Français-Anglais WordReference.com 2017), while *flâneur* means (as a noun) a "stroller [or] (pejoratively) a loafer," and (as an adjective) wandering (Flâneur - traduction - Dictionnaire Français-Anglais WordReference.com 2017). The difficulties of defining this word can be seen in the fact that there is a wide range of both positive and negative synonyms for *flâneur*, including some that also contain a juxtaposition of positive and negative connotations. One such word is *badaud*, which is described as a "*flâneur* who passes the time looking at everything that seems to be extraordinary or new," or as a "simpleton who admires everything, is amused by everything, and who has a frivolous sense of curiosity" (*badaud* - Wiktionnaire 2016).

The *flâneur* came to prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when famous French figures, including the painter Édouard Manet and the author Charles Baudelaire, used the *flâneur* to serve as a literal embodiment of the changing times and the increasing urbanization and modernization of France (Golsan 1996). In these 19<sup>th</sup> century depictions, the *flâneur* is an urban wanderer who lacks a destination but has an immense appreciation for the juxtaposition of the old and the new that is apparent in his contemporary France. With urbanization came a struggle between holding onto the old vestiges of French culture and embracing the progress being made on artistic, humanistic and structural levels. The *flâneur* is a central figure in bridging this gap, connecting old France with progress and modernity. This emphasis on making connections to the “new” France may explain why *flâneur* can hold a negative connotation, since a greater ease of life, which often leads to more leisure time, is often placed in opposition to the hard work of the past. This notion is something we can clearly see in America today, where “millennials” are often described as lazy, self-centered and unwilling to do the hard work of those who came before them.

In addition to this general term of a person of leisure who wanders the streets seeking out meaning in the world around him, there was a more scholarly definition put forth by the philosopher Walter Benjamin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. According to Benjamin, the *flâneur* served to highlight “the superimposition of past on present,” and how this imposition helped to shape modern Europe, and France in particular (Edmond 2010, 377). France is known for its arts and its national culture, and therefore the French *flâneur* serves as an important, if not dichotomous, figure that embodies leisure,

appreciation for visual and historical culture, and a certain relaxation that is embodied in the ideals of French culture, even today.

In my more than ten years studying French in a school setting, I never came across this word; It was only when I studied abroad in Paris that I encountered it. In my first course abroad, a short yet intensive grammar course whose purpose was to prepare us American students for study in French universities, our teacher explained what *flâner* meant, highlighting this term's significance within Paris (and greater France) in particular. Throughout my ten months in France, I recall this term being used almost exclusively in a positive sense, perhaps because there are much more common words, such as  *paresseux/paresseuse*, *lent(e)* or *irresponsable*, that are used when describing someone as lazy or reluctant to take on responsibility.

In my experience, this term was almost always used in a very informal setting, and had strong ties to appreciation. For example, if I woke up early and took the time to walk to class, strolling along the river and stopping to appreciate the beauty of Paris, my host mother would classify me as being a *flâneur*. If, however, I took the metro to class and took a quick walk along the river in order to make it to my building, I would just be a *promeneur/promeneuse*, someone who walks. In tying in this idea of appreciation with the act of walking or strolling, the underlying emphasis on France's cultural heritage becomes more apparent.

French culture is dependent on its heritage. The French people deify past French poets, artists, leaders and other cultural figures, overall espousing a humanist view of their society (Goldhammer 2010). Putting humanism at the forefront of traditional French culture means that the *flâneur* stands as a symbol of someone who strolls and

wanders in order to learn more about his place in society, as well as the contributions to those who have come before him. In this sense, the *flâneur* does not just stroll the streets, he wanders with a purpose, taking his time to relax and appreciate the beauty of France and its cultural contributions to the world.

Therefore, a more complete definition of *flâneur* may be someone who:

*Positively:*

- (a) Strolls or wanders aimlessly but pleurably
- (b) Takes the time to appreciate their surroundings and the small things in their life
- (c) Reflects on and ponders their place in the world
- (d) Feels a connection to the culture, both seen and felt, around them
- (e) Feels good when they wander
- (f) Has a positive experience in appreciating the world around them
- (g) Connects the past with the present through visual representations of heritage

*Negatively:*

- (h) Is simple-minded
- (i) Likes to do nothing
- (j) Is a loafer
- (k) Has no obligations
- (l) Shirks their responsibilities

Since this word was not something I learned in a foreign language class, but rather something that was expressed to me within the specific cultural setting of Paris, its cultural significance is inextricable from its meaning, which is why it is so difficult to define. Since its meaning is so clearly tied to France's appreciation for and pride in their culture, *flâner/flâneur* could certainly be characterized as a highly reflective, if not key, word in regards to French language and culture.

## Works Cited

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