Henri Gervex, *Rolla,* 1878

Oil on canvas, 175 x 220cm

Scope of Work: Literary subject in painting

**Narrative in the painting**

* Depicts a scene from a poem called *Rolla*, by the French writer Alfred de Musset
* This long poem tells the story of Jacques Rolla who is young, rich, dissolute.
* Rolla meets a young prostitute named Marie
* Marie has turned to prostitution at the encouragement of her mother, to escape a life of poverty
* Rolla has squandered his inheritance and now faces a life of poverty. He feels guilt at the life he has lived
* He spends his remaining money on a night with Marie
* She believes he loves her and that they will spend their lives happily together
* When Rolla wakes in the morning he realises he has no future and decides to end his life. Marie sleeps on, unaware of what he is going to do.
* Rolla stands at an open window looking out at the city of Paris and contemplating his death  
  Rolla: “*Oh, ghastly suicide! If I had wings, I'd fly   
  Above the encumb'ring earth, in yon pure, lovely sky*”
* In the poem Marie wakes and Rolla tells her his plans, she tries to change his mind but he poisons himself and dies in Marie’s arms

Marie: “*I have no money, all the gold that I receive,*

*As soon as I reach home I to my mother give;*

*But I have my gold necklace, all I own on earth-*

*Would you that I sell it, and give to you its worth?*

*Jacques smiled in answer, but no word spoke he,*

*And drank the contents of a vial hurriedly.*

*Then bending o'er the girl's fair form his livid face,*

*He softly pressed his lips upon the gold necklace.*

*When from her living breast she raised his drooping head,*

*Pallid, with staring eyes, Jacques Rolla fell back dead.*

*His spirit forth had flown in that chaste, tender kiss,*

*But for a moment both had known love's holy bliss.*

**Context**

* Henri Gervex trained under Cabanel and his works appear academic in their application of paint. He showed frequently at the Paris Salon.
* However Gervex was friends with Manet and Degas, avant-garde painters. Degas advised Gervex to add a sense of realism to the scene.
* Gervex included in the foreground, a pile of Marie’s and Jacques’ clothing. This emphasised to the viewer that the couple had hurriedly undressed before spending the night together.
* It was this element which caused a scandal and stopped the work from being shown at the Salon of 1878.
* The figure of Marie is idealised in the academic manner and her pose appears similar to Cabanel’s 1863 ‘*Birth of Venus*’.
* The scene is set in a bedroom furnished in the Rococo revival style, which was popular at the time of the painting. Despite the poem itself being written over 40 years earlier- these props make the topic more relevant to daily life at that time.
* Marie’s red corset draws the attention of the viewer, contrasting with the white of her discarded petticoats and dress.
* The white sheets and Marie’s pale body suggest fragility and vulnerability.
* On the bedside table we see a necklace, reminding us of the one worn by Marie in the poem.
* A bedside lamp remains lit, implying the lovers have been awake all night
* Rolla’s walking cane which protrudes from beneath a top hat appears phallic.
* Scenes of prostitution appear frequently in French painting from this period. Gervex was inspired by Manet’s painting ‘*Nana*’, which in turn was inspired by a prostitute from a novel by Emile Zola.
* The light colour scheme and soft lighting contradict the dark subject matter of the work.
* The face of Rolla remains in shadow, possibly implying his mind is clouded with dark thoughts
* The view of Paris from the open window gives a specific location to the scene, the poem was also situated in Paris.  
    
  Q. How does this work differ to the other Literary subject painting we have studied: Millais’s *Ophelia* ? Consider subject, setting, figure, technique  
    
  Q. How faithful does Gervex remain to the narrative of the poem? Does he take artistic licence with any aspect of the poem?  
    
  Q. (In 7 mins ) Explain the ways in which one French painting depicts a scene from literature. (5 marks)  
    
  Q. (In 21 mins) Explore and evaluate the use of narrative in two paintings of literary scenes from this period. (15 marks).

Musée d’Orsay essay on this painting:

<http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/rolla-21519.html?tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=5e35c5aec9>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-story-behind-the-most-famous-morning-after-scene-in-art-history>