

THE MUSE

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(La Muse)



Desire becomes inspiration becomes obsession becomes possession.

A defiant young artist vies with her charismatic superstar-painter brother for possession of their alluring and enigmatic muse. But having overcome his controlling influence, her perspective starts to shift...

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OUTLINE

The Muse is a bio-drama based on a true story extrapolated from the writings and three key paintings of the Welsh artist Gwen John.

Set at first in Edwardian London, then in France and, briefly, in Belgium, **The Muse** tells the story a young woman's *rites of passage* from shy and inhibited wannabe artist living in the shadow of her supremely talented and domineering younger brother—the portrait painter Augustus John—to become a unique and acclaimed portrait painter in her own right.

The Muse is a love story... about the darker side of love.

Gwen's transformation is brought about through an intense relationship with Dorothy/Dorelia, a beautiful and uninhibited free spirit with an unorthodox sense of style—a sort of proto-hippy—with whom Augustus is also infatuated.

Augustus is a complex, fully formed character. He is glamorous, strikingly handsome and charismatic, clever and witty, self-confident to the point of arrogance, unnervingly direct to the point of rudeness and indomitable. Feted by fashionable society, he has wealthy clients queuing up to have their portraits painted and is becoming wealthy himself on the fees he's able to charge. He is promiscuous, animalistic and ritually dominating, having sex with his female sitters as if copulation were an essential part of the portraiture process. He is instinctive and intuitive to such a degree that women find him hard to resist. (This is a period when women can't report rape or sexual harassment for fear of the consequences to their reputation or marital status.)

As comfortable with gypsies and vagabonds as he is with members of high society, Augustus is always the centre of attention, always the winner, a man who can drink any rival under the table and fight with his fists if needs be. There's an air of menace about him, something slightly deranged. He can be kind and generous one minute, yet selfish and lacking in empathy the next, especially when his needs and desires conflict with those of others. Yet he is restless, always seeking new diversions and stimulations, and prone to absent himself to the country or travel abroad during periods of introspection and depression.

Gwen, too, is complex. She is in transition—a late developer searching for meaning and identity; still to find her *métier* and fulfil her creative potential. She is attractive and intelligent although not alluring in the manner of her

friend, Dorelia. She is demure, reticent and introverted, generally uncaring of her physical wellbeing or appearance. She is ascetic, solitary, self-contained and seemingly unworldly but, like her brother, Gwen is shrewd and possessed of a steely determination to get what she wants. Once roused, she can be fearless, impulsive, implacable and ruthless.

Gwen doesn't make friends easily, but when she does it's with a wholehearted devotion and intensity bordering on obsession that can be disturbing to the object of her infatuation. Once aroused, she becomes sensuous, seductive, intensely passionate and overwhelmingly possessive.

Dorelia is inscrutable but generous and easy-going. She understands Gwen and is content to go along with her plans, up to a point. As the object of Gwen's obsession, Dorelia stimulates the fulfilment of her artistic potential and facilitates her sexual awakening. Dorelia is happy-go-lucky but practical, adaptive and capable. She's aware of her power of attraction and yet she's compassionate. She doesn't abuse it. But she doesn't realise that Gwen has a ruthless streak when anything or anyone—even someone she loves—stands in her way.

It's a story of sibling rivalry...

Gwen and Augustus are close. They spent all their time together as children when they lived on the Pembrokeshire coast, learning to draw and paint. They shared a room as penniless art students. They understand one another. Beneath the surface, they share some similar traits. Their mother died when Gwen was 8 years old. Augustus, although younger, assumed a patriarchal role. He still tries to manage her life, as he does with everyone close to him, but she invariably ignores his advice. Gwen finds him domineering and overbearing.

Gwen and Augustus both won awards at college. But Augustus' brilliant draftsmanship and confidence in his craft has made him a glamorous society superstar, while Gwen has yet to find inspiration and lacks commercial ambition. Nevertheless, Augustus admires his sister's work. He tries to help her find a market but she spurns his offers to have her work exhibited.

It emerges that Ida, Augustus' wife, was formerly Gwen's close friend and confidante, her first crush. Augustus seduced Ida, made her pregnant and then married her, taking her away from Gwen. Now he intends to do the same with Dorelia although, being married, he plans to make her his live-in mistress. He

establishes power over her at their very first meeting, deciding to call her 'Dorelia' rather than Dorothy (McNeill), her given name. Dorelia is his creation.

With two small children to care for and pregnant for a third time, Ida acquiesces to their *ménage à trois* in an attempt to save her marriage. But she, too, adores Dorelia, relying on her for companionship and help with the housework. The women form a close bond but Dorelia is not entirely comfortable with her own position. Gwen's defiance proves ineffectual against her domineering brother. She is resentful that he possesses the people she loves.

A journey that becomes an odyssey...

When an opportunity arises to take Dorelia away from Augustus and keep her out of his clutches, Gwen grasps it. She times her move, catching her brother during one of his restless periods. He encourages her plan, unaware of her true motives. Dorelia is conflicted about her relationship with Augustus and Ida so she's glad to go. Gwen and Dorelia embark upon a journey of discovery, ostensibly a walk to Rome that becomes a protracted odyssey in France.

This is at a time when the suffragette movement is just getting started, 26 years before women would get the vote. Respectable young women are chaperoned. Few women have an independent income and married women are considered to be chattels of their husbands. It is a period of rapid change, women are beginning to make their mark, but the art world is almost entirely dominated by men, as is the world in general. The concept of two young women artists travelling alone in a foreign country is surprising to everyone they come across.

Obsession is transitory. possession unfulfilling...

Gwen's obsession with Dorelia proves transitory. Once a man she admires gives her attention, her interest in Dorelia wanes. She is suddenly transformed by her new obsession. With the spell broken, she encourages Dorelia to go back to Augustus and Ida, but Dorelia makes a break for freedom—although, significantly, not for independence—by running away with Leonard, an unknown Belgian artist with whom she's had a drunken one-night stand. Yet Dorelia's resistance is doomed against the combined forces of Augustus and Gwen. Her fate seems to be preordained, at least that's what they tell her.

The resolution is paradoxical...

Gwen's transformation is completed when she herself becomes an object of desire, the focal point of creation—**the muse**—for a man considered to be the greatest living artist of his day, an artist more famous even than Augustus.

Significantly perhaps, her lover and 'master', the sculptor Auguste Rodin, has the same first name as her brother. Rodin is a much older man and a devout Catholic who is devoted to his lifelong partner. Although he seduces Gwen, their affair seems to spark through Gwen willing it rather than by a coincidence of nature or through his own conscious volition. Rather he responds to her devotion, frankness and passionate intensity.

Before discarding her, Gwen draws inspiration from Dorelia to produce two masterpieces as well as to liberate her sexuality. Then she usurps Dorelia's mantle by becoming Rodin's muse. She is remorseful but, rather like Augustus, she is driven by her own emotions and newly discovered ambitions.

Her legacy will not be limited to her own paintings and drawings, which are, nowadays, attributed a generally higher value than the works of her brother. A full-size nude likeness of her as an allegorical figure, 'climbing the mountain of fame' in **La Muse**, a counterpart to *The Thinker*, will be Rodin's last great masterpiece and a whole new concept for a public monument.

La Muse was commissioned as a memorial to Gwen's former tutor, the painter James McNeill Whistler. It is nowadays known as *Whistler's Muse* and is seen by more than 700,000 visitors a year outside the Musée Rodin in Paris.

But The Muse is not a quaint little film about art history...

The Muse is about the intimate relationships of a gifted but unfulfilled young woman struggling for self-realisation.

TREATMENT

Budding artist Gwen meets legal secretary Dorothy at an art school evening class. Strikingly exotic and alluring, the world seems to revolve around Dorothy. Drawn together as the only women in the class, they strike up a friendship, which for Gwen quickly becomes an infatuation.

At a party, Gwen introduces Dorothy to Augustus, her charismatic celebrity-artist brother. Captivated, Augustus asks Dorothy to model for him. He introduces her to his friends as ‘Dorelia’, a pet name everyone adopts.

Gwen accompanies Dorelia to her modelling session. She helps Ida, her sister-in-law, with the housework while Augustus and Dorelia have sex in the adjoining studio. Hamstrung by domesticity—Ida has a new baby and a small child to care for, she seems resigned to the notion that sexual domination is an intrinsic part of her husband’s creative process.

Dorelia becomes a fixture in Augustus and Ida’s household, helping Ida with the housework as well as posing for Augustus. Dorelia makes Ida feel ugly and uninteresting but the two women form a close bond. Now a visitor, Gwen is resentful of her domineering brother and frustrated by her own exclusion.

When Augustus announces that he intends to go away for the summer, Gwen grasps the opportunity to ask Dorelia to ‘elope’ with her to Rome. Ida is unhappy at the prospect of being left alone and fearful for their safety but Augustus approves the plan, portentously presenting Gwen with a revolver for their protection. He intends to rent a large house in the country in which they can all live on their return. Confiding in Gwen that she needs a break from the intensity of Augustus and Ida, Dorelia agrees to go.

Gwen’s plan evolves into a detour via the south of France. They catch a steamer to Bordeaux and walk up the Garonne valley, lugging their art equipment. They sleep rough in the countryside, stopping to sketch and paint along the way.

Hungry and short of money, they meet a shepherd whose dialect they can’t understand. He lures them to a remote cottage with gestured promises of food and shelter, but once inside he locks the door. When he becomes menacing, Gwen threatens him with the revolver and they manage to escape.

Sheltering in a barn, light-headed with hunger and hallucinating, they meet Leonard, a Belgian artist on vacation from Paris. He brings them some food and

a bottle of wine and they get drunk. Gwen watches enthralled while Leonard and Dorelia have sex in the hay.

Leonard tells Dorelia he loves her and begs her to live with him. Dorelia is torn. Tired of enduring their difficult circumstances, she wants to go. She suggests they both travel back with him but Gwen won't agree. She gives Leonard short shrift and he backs down. He gives them his address in Paris before he leaves.

Their fortunes improve in a small market town where they do brisk business selling Gwen's instant portraits. They make enough money to travel on to Toulouse where they rent an attic room in which to live and paint.

While Gwen is working on a portrait of *Dorelia in a Black Dress*, letters arrive from Augustus and Ida, now installed in their new country house, asking when they plan to come back. Gwen won't countenance a return until the picture is finished, but then suggests that they try living in Paris before going home.

From a grubby room in the artists' district, Dorelia takes in the sights while Gwen tours studios looking for work as an artist's model. Having been rejected and propositioned, she tries her luck at the studio of the world-renowned sculptor, Auguste Rodin, where she gains an audience with the great man on the strength of her brother's name.

Rodin is impressed that she trained under the recently departed James Whistler, for whom he has been commissioned to create a memorial. He shows her his sketches for the monument and is impressed by her forthright criticism. The huge studio is a hive of activity. Assistants make moulds for castings and naked models wander about. He asks Gwen to undress and she does so without embarrassment. He compliments her body and invites her to join his models.

More urgent letters arrive from Augustus and Ida insisting that if Gwen wants to stay in Paris, she send Dorelia back. Augustus claims to be unable to work without her. To Dorelia's amazement, Gwen agrees. She dispassionately tells Dorelia her place is with Augustus and that she must go to him. Dorelia rails against being treated like a chattel and slaps her. Gwen slaps her back. They wrestle into a dishevelled, tearful embrace, which leads to fervid sex.

When Gwen arrives home from work one day, she finds that Dorelia has moved out. She breaks down and cries. Staring at her reflection in a mirror, she sets up a small canvas and begins to work on an intensely analytical self-portrait.

Enchanted by Gwen, Rodin asks her opinion and offers advice on her work. She confides in him, complaining about her overbearing brother. She calls him *maître* (master). Their intimacy provokes jealousy and hostility amongst the other models but Rainer, a poet serving as Rodin's secretary, befriends her.

Early one morning, Augustus appears in Paris. Dorelia has not returned to England. He berates Gwen for losing his muse but admires her portrait of *Dorelia in a Black Dress*, insisting on entering it in a forthcoming exhibition. Gwen thinks about where Dorelia might have gone and finds Leonard's address. She wants to go to work at Rodin's studio but Augustus bullies her into visiting Leonard's apartment where they learn from the concierge that he has left for Bruges with Dorelia.

Rushing to Bruges, Augustus and Gwen confront the couple. Augustus convinces Dorelia to return with him while Gwen dispassionately crushes Leonard's meek resistance by invoking higher artistic motives and ideals.

Alone again in Paris, Gwen receives a visit from Rodin who has been worried by her absence. He praises her self-portrait, expresses admiration for her and seduces her. She joyfully submits to his lovemaking.

The next day, he places Gwen on a podium at the centre of the studio, arranging her in a complicated pose. He tells her she has inspired a new approach for Whistler's memorial. It won't be an effigy or historical scene but an allegorical figure, a representation of Gwen 'climbing the mountain of fame'. Its title will be *La Muse*. Gwen is serene, maintaining the pose while he works on the sculpture.

Gwen's portrait of *Dorelia in a Black Dress* draws an admiring crowd at an exhibition in London. Augustus, with a heavily pregnant but glamorous Dorelia on his arm, basks in the reflected glory. He quips that in 50 years time he'll simply be remembered as Gwen's brother.

PRINCIPLE CHARACTERS

GWENDOLEN ‘GWEN’ MARY JOHN was born in Haverford West, Wales in 1876. The second of four children, she is 27 years old at the beginning of our story. Her father was a solicitor whose ‘dour temperament cast a chill over his family’. Her mother died when she was 8 years old, but not before instilling a love of painting and drawing in her two middle children. During her illness, her mother’s two sisters, who were stern Salvationists, cared for the children. After the family moved to Tenby, Gwen was educated by governesses. From 1895 to 1898 she studied at the Slade School of Art, at the time the only school in the UK that accepted women students, although men and women were segregated. She shared lodgings with Augustus, who had started at the Slade a year earlier, the siblings subsisting on a diet of fruit and nuts to reduce their expenses. Gwen developed a close friendship with fellow student Ida Nettleship who would become her brother’s first wife. She travelled to Paris in 1898 and stayed for a year studying under James McNeill Whistler at his school, Académie Carmen. After the events of our story, she spent the rest of her life in France, ultimately living in solitude except for her cats. The patronage of American art collector John Quinn, who bought most of her works until his death in 1924, freed her to work as an artist. She died in Dieppe in 1939 aged 63.

AUGUSTUS EDWIN JOHN was born in Tenby, Wales in 1878. He is 25 years old at the beginning of our story but is already established as British society’s most fashionable portrait painter. He became the star pupil at the Slade School of Art and was already established as the greatest draftsman of his generation before he graduated. He married Ida Nettleship in 1901. The couple had five children together. They shared an ménage à trois with Dorothy McNeill, with whom Augustus had two children, until Ida died in 1907. Dorelia became his second wife and lifelong partner, the couple producing two more children, but his promiscuity led to him having children with many other women. He ceased to be a moving force in British art in old age but was revered as an artist right up until his death at Fordingbridge, England in 1961, aged 81 years.

IDA MARGARET JOHN (née Nettleship) was born in Hampstead, London in 1877, the daughter of an artist and a dressmaker. She is 26 years old at the start of our story. She became a student at the Slade in 1892 where she became close friends with Gwen John. After their graduation in 1898, the friends travelled to Paris with fellow student Gwen Salmond, living and studying together under Whistler at the Académie Carmen. Returning to London, she met Augustus,

married and seems to have abandoned her art to continual pregnancy and housekeeping until her death from puerperal infection after the birth of her fifth child in 1907, when she was 30 years old.

DOROTHY 'DORELIA' MCNEILL was born in Camberwell, London in 1881. The fourth of seven children, she was the daughter of a clerk. At the beginning of our story she is a 23-year-old legal secretary with aspirations to be an artist. She met Gwen at the Westminster School of Art in 1903 and fell into the clutches of Augustus soon after. She found fame as a model, not just for Gwen and Augustus, but also for several other leading artists of the day. She was feted as a bohemian fashion icon and style-setter. Having brought up ten children, including Augustus' illegitimate son Tristram de Vere Cole, the television producer, she outlived her husband, dying in 1969 at the age of 88.

'LEONARD' is something of an enigma. Despite extensive searches by the John's biographer Michael Holroyd, his true identity remains a mystery. None of his work is catalogued and no record of him remains either in Bruges or Paris. The only concrete record of his existence is a letter he wrote to Gwen, from which part of his address in Bruges is missing.

FRANÇOIS 'AUGUSTE' RENÉ RODIN was born into a working class Parisian family in 1840. His father was a police department clerk. He is 63 years old at the time of our story, an artist of world-renown, a cultural icon in France and the greatest living artist of his day. Desperately poor until he was 30, his wealth grew steadily as his fame spread and he received commissions for public works as well as from corporations and for the busts of wealthy individuals. His income from busts alone was more than 200,000 francs per year, a huge sum at the time. He employed a small army of assistants to make duplicates of his works. He had numerous affairs, the most infamous of which ended with the nervous breakdown, confinement and death of the sculptor Camille Claudel, but he never left his lifelong partner Rose Beuret, who had stuck by him when he was poor. His affair with Gwen was probably his last. He married Rose in the last year of both their lives. Although he died in 1917, aged 77, he remains one of few sculptors widely known outside the visual arts community. *The Thinker* and *The Kiss* are amongst the most recognised works in all of sculpture.

RENÉ KARL WILHELM JOHANN JOSEF 'RAINER' MARIA RILKE was born in Prague in 1875. He is 28 years old at the time of our story. Having travelled to Paris to write a monograph on Rodin, he is working as the great man's secretary, also teaching and giving lectures on Rodin's life and work. He went on

to be widely recognised as one of the most lyrically intense German-language poets and an acclaimed novelist. His work has recently found new audiences through its use by numerous New Age theologians and self-help authors and through quotations in books, television programmes and films. He died in Montreux, Switzerland in 1926 aged 51.

MARKET and AUDIENCE

The Muse is most likely to appeal to ABC1 men and women aged 35-55+ with a 60/40% gender bias towards women. This audience, which is underserved with product, is expanding as a percentage of the total UK box office (36%) and is expected to make up as much as 75% of the film's UK cinema audience.

However, France is the key market for biopics about artists. *Camille Claudel* (Bruno Nuytten, 1988), *Van Gogh* (Maurice Pialat, 1991), *Séraphine* (Martin Provost, 2008) and *Renoir* (Gilles Bourdos, 2012) have established a firm foundation for the genre. These films made a profit in their home market alone.

British independent films in this genre have also performed well in France. *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (Peter Webber, 2003), which was produced by Andy Paterson's one-man production company, Archer Street Productions, grossed \$31.5 million at the worldwide box office (£3.84 million UK) on a budget of £10 million and sold particularly well in France where it grossed €5.34 million, more than it managed in its home market.

Christopher Hampton's *Carrington* (1995), which stars Emma Thompson and Jonathan Price, grossed \$3.243 million in the US, \$1.015 million (£0.625 million) in the UK and €3.806 million (\$4.052 million) in France, despite being made in the English language and exhibited with subtitles.

Frida (Julie Taymor, 2000), which starred Salma Hayek as the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, is commercially the most successful film ever in the genre, returning \$56 million at the box office on a budget of \$12 million. *Big Eyes* (Tim Burton, 2014) achieved \$29 million at the box office on a budget of \$10 million.

However, the majority of films in this genre fail commercially. Despite critical acclaim and a host of high profile award wins and nominations, *Mr Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014), a Film 4-led French co-production, failed to deliver at the box office and was carrying a loss before its release on DVD. *Klimt* (Raúl Ruiz, 2006), a film starring John Malkovich, which was made in English, French and German, also failed to deliver at the box office. *Pollock* (Ed Harris, 2000) just about broke even while *Love is the Devil: Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon* (John Maybury, 1998) and *Modigliani* (Mick Davis, 2004) were both critical and commercial disasters, and not even Robert Altman and Tim Roth could save *Vincent & Theo* (1990), a largely French-led co-production, from tumbling into the money pit. Despite winning the Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival,

Caravaggio (Derek Jarman, 1986) achieved barely any cinema distribution and was finally released on DVD in 2008. *Surviving Picasso* (James Ivory, 1996), which made a loss of about £10 million, is the least successful of the Merchant Ivory films.

It might be concluded that creatively and commercially successful independent films in this genre, exemplified by *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, depend upon inspired direction, astute casting, visually arresting cinematography, sumptuous settings, deft production and a high penetration of the French cinema market. But first and foremost, those films that have succeeded in the marketplace have all had compelling storylines and emotionally involving characters.

Mercurial is not aware of any closely competing films currently in development, production or post-production in this genre.

STYLE and PRODUCTION

Although based on real people and documented events, **The Muse** does not conform to a conventional biopic format. Its narrative, non-deterministic plot, settings and existential themes might give the film the feel of a modern take on the French New Wave. In common with much of that genre, it asks questions it doesn't answer, encouraging us to form our own conclusions.

The Muse is entirely focused on the protagonist, as if we were obsessed with Gwen, intently studying her emotions and minutely watching her every move. She is in every scene. There are six supporting characters: Dorelia, Augustus, Ida, Leonard, Rodin and Rainer, plus a Limousin shepherd who delivers a few lines in Occitan. A handful of minor characters each deliver a few lines.

There is a single plot line with two distinct plot points. Dialogue is sparse and in the modern idiom. The visuals are naturalistic and tightly framed around the characters to create a quiet, slow-moving, tense, mysterious, erotic and transcendent world, evocative of the period as well as of portraiture.

The pace is punctuated with two sequences of rapid action: when Gwen and Dorelia escape from the shepherd who seems intent on rape, and when Dorelia runs away with Leonard and the Johns pursue them to Bruges.

Gwen John's work often features a sombre palette of thin glazes reminiscent of Dutch old masters and the use of internal light without superfluous adornment. These elements will be reflected in the cinematography.

The Muse does not require expensive sets to be built. The spaces inhabited by the narrative are generally spartan. There are street scenes in London, Le Marais in Paris, Toulouse and Bruges, but locations are mainly in rural southwest France, which will require relatively simple dressing given that it hasn't changed much in the last century. There are internal scenes in London, Toulouse and Paris. There are crowd scenes at a London party, an evening class and at an exhibition, plus an external crowd scene in a southern French town.

There are scenes involving sex between Augustus and Dorelia (off screen), Leonard and Dorelia, Gwen and Dorelia and Gwen and Rodin (on screen), which are fundamental to the plot and character development. There is also full frontal nudity of an aesthetic rather than sexual nature in scenes at Rodin's studio, which will require body models. The treatment of these scenes will affect whether the film receives an R (15) or NC-17 (18) rating.





