

ZOLA, EMILE

Emile Zola, life and works. Emile Zola (1840-1902), who was to become known as the Father of French Naturalism, and who has left a powerful mark on the French fictional tradition, as well as on liberal politics in France, was born in Paris, son of an Italian engineer. After moving to the south of France, as a youngster, he returned to Paris in 1858, at the age of eighteen. He worked for some time, unsuccessfully, as a sales clerk, then as a journalist. At that point he decided to devote his attention to literature. He began his literary career, as did Balzac, by writing popular horror and mystery stories. (An early autobiography, found sordid by the public, showed what was to be his lifelong talent for probing the dark side of human social nature.) From early on, however, he began conceiving the ideas of an extensive series of fictions in which the novel would become a kind of sociology, recording the growth of industrialization and the new middle class in France. His novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) heralded this large systematic vision—one thinks in this connection of Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*—which was the first step toward the novel of Naturalism, and toward the series, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, of which twenty volumes were eventually to be written. It should be added that the cultural climate into which Zola wrote this work supported the idea of society, and its members, as parts of a vast evolving organism: the ideas of Darwin, of Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), who formulated the notion of *race*, *moment*, and *milieu* as the determining shapers of society, and even the first texts of 'social science' were creating a new climate of social analysis. As it happened Zola chose to exemplify his vision/theory by a single family and its many members, all of whom were socially limited and even physiologically broken; good examples, therefore, of the broadly scornful view Zola had, of the human animal. Despite the limitations theory imposed on his vision, however, Zola has left us with three wonderfully powerful novels, on the level with the work of Dreiser, in America: *L'Assommoir* (1877), a brutal attack on the damages done by drink; *Germinal* (1885) on the conflict between capital and labor in a miner's strike; and *La Débâcle* (1892) a study of politics and war.

Zola's literary theories and methods. In many senses, Zola is most remembered for his startlingly new conception of the role and nature of the novel. The key term here is Naturalism, a word chosen by Zola himself, to indicate that his method is similar to that used in the natural sciences. This technique is a combination of minute and impersonal observation (derived from Balzac and Stendahl) and the experimental method used in science. This method was suggested to Zola by his reading of Claude Bernard's *Introduction to Experimental Medicine* (1865). Zola explains his theories in *The Experimental Novel* (1880). His own usual procedure is to begin not with a plot or some character, but with a cross section of life he wants to portray. Then he selects some suitable characters and endows each with a few elementary traits. (He regularly visited the real scenes of upcoming fictions—a strike, an industrial plant, a certain urban neighborhood, before starting to write.) The cross section he chose to portray is almost invariably sordid, and the portrait is nearly accompanied by the pessimism characteristic of the realists and naturalists.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Ladies' Paradise, tr. Brian Nelson, 2008.

Secondary source reading

Brown, Frederick, *Zola: A Life*, 1995.

Further reading

Hemmings, F.W.J., *Emile Zola*, 1966.

Original language reading

Mitterand, Henri, *Zola*, 1999.

Suggested paper topics

What do you think of the kind of 'scientific perspective' onto society, with which Zola intends to guide us through his fictions? Is it truly scientific? Does it work artistically?

Does Zola emerge from his hugely ambitious work with a respect, even love, for humanity? Does he find the lovable in the human beings he portrays, or does he bring that love, if that is the right word, to his vision of the human whole?

Excerpt

http://www.culinate.com/books/book_excerpts/the_belly_of_paris

Especially was this the case with the peaches, the blushing peaches of Montreuil, with skin as delicate and clear as that of northern maidens, and the yellow, sunburnt peaches from the south, brown like the damsels of Provence. The apricots, on their beds of moss, gleamed with the hue of amber or with that sunset glow which so warmly colors the necks of brunettes at the nape, just under the little wavy curls which fall below the chignon.

The cherries, ranged one by one, resembled the short lips of smiling Chinese girls; the Montmorencies suggested the dumpy mouths of buxom women; the English ones were longer and graver-looking; the common black ones seemed as though they had been bruised and crushed by kisses; while the white-hearts, with their patches of rose and white, appeared to smile with mingled merriment and vexation. Then piles of apples and pears, built up with architectural symmetry, often in pyramids, displayed the ruddy glow of budding breasts and the gleaming sheen of shoulders, quite a show of nudity, lurking modestly behind a screen of fern leaves. There were all sorts of varieties — little red ones so tiny that they seemed to be yet in the cradle, shapeless Tambours for baking, *calvilles* in light yellow gowns, sanguineous-looking Canadas, blotched *châtaignier* apples, fair, freckled rennets, and dusky russets. Then came the pears — the *blanquettes*, the British queens, the *beurrés*, the *messirejeans*, and the duchesses — some dumpy, some long and tapering, some with slender necks, and others with thick-set shoulders, their green and yellow bellies picked out at times with a splotch of carmine. By the side of these the transparent plums resembled tender, chlorotic virgins; the greengages and the Orleans plums paled as with modest innocence, while the mirabelles lay like the golden beads of a rosary forgotten in a box among sticks of vanilla. And the strawberries exhaled a sweet perfume — a perfume of youth — especially those little ones which are gathered in the woods, and which are far more aromatic than the large ones grown in gardens, for these breathe an insipid odor suggestive of the watering pot.