

Zola's "scientific" method in the presentation of thérèse



**ASSIGN
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Throughout the novel *Thérèse Raquin*, it is apparent that Zola has chosen a particular light in which he wants the reader to view each of his characters. He did so with the theme and idea of naturalism with the focal points being temperaments and bestiality through a third person narration. In the preface to the novel, Zola states ' my aim has been above all scientific' (Preface to the Second Edition 1868, page 4). *Thérèse* in particular is portrayed to have gone through the most adversity and is set with the biggest of challenges in the novel. It is her response that the reader is most accustomed to in how she deals with these obstacles being the environment, influences and having a lack of control over herself, as subsequently, she is at the pinnacle of all that takes place.

In consideration of this basis of his study, he created four characters based on four elements (of temperaments) that doctors in the time of the 19th century believed made up the human body: *Thérèse* who is nervous; *Laurent* who is sanguine; *Camille* who is lymphatic; *Mme Raquin* who is bilious. The constructions of these characters influenced Zola and so he ' chose to set [himself] certain problems and to solve them' with the instance of experimenting and discovering certain outcomes if these temperaments were to be paired up and, when or if facing adversity, how the lack of balance of the tempers would affect each character.

Zola uses a range of adjectives that are associated with negative connotations and imagery to set the scene in the beginning of the novel. He describes the *Passage du Pont-Neuf* to be " black with grime" and " full of darkness" with windows that " cast strange, greenish reflections on the goods inside"(1). The use of visual imagery here as well as adjectives such

as 'strange', immediately creates an environment of tension deprived of 'living' souls. These descriptions possess gothic elements. The reader feels sympathy for Thérèse knowing that these are her living conditions. It is clear that the environment has oppressed Thérèse. It seems that society and her environment have shaped her repressed nature by offering no motivation for exploration and later, when having met Laurent, inflamed her desires for freedom.

Having said all of this, Zola has taken the approach that your surroundings can be responsible for a lack of drive. He makes an attempt to show the reader that Thérèse is one who is easily influenced by her environment in her journey of self-discovery. Much of this journey takes place literally and symbolically on the river Seine. We are told that the river Seine is an area that has brought Thérèse happiness as well as anguish, as we know that when she was younger, this was the place she would escape to where she was able to run wild without any restrictions and, as it were, 'be free'. Her journey of adversity literally takes place on the river, as this is where her biggest obstacle of all (the murder of Camille) takes place. However, The Seine is also symbolic in the sense that it takes on the journey of her life in representing her feelings, as Thérèse "fantasizes that the river is about to rise up and engulf her"(xviii), much like her inability to cope with the pressure she is under which overwhelms her after Camille's death and her then current situation with Laurent. In addition Zola states that the Seine is a "mythical place... for dark desires" and "terrors of the mind"(xviii). This represents Thérèse's urges to be savage, for example, like her incentive to commit adultery. This reinforces the idea that being closer to nature has the

ability to bring out your 'inner animal'. Her obsession with the River unfortunately has come to betray her and instead bring her even more despair.

Zola presents Thérèse through the means of using desire as a theme in the novel to expose an element of bestiality in her. This is apparent in the novel at the point where Thérèse first meets Laurent. Zola says she looked at him and "his rectangular features with their sanguine beauty." (26). We already establish the fact that Laurent apparently fascinates Thérèse through the use of adjectives and descriptive writing. It is as if Laurent has unleashed the 'passionate existence' (16) that lurked inside her but was hidden for so long. He points out his 'rectangular features' in particular suggesting that he is quite broad stating his suggested offering of protection he potentially has for Thérèse.

Here, Zola is addressing the idea that opposites attract, as Thérèse's character is nervous whilst Laurent's character is sanguine. This opposition ignites her repressed emotions which, in some instances, can be compared to the desires of animals: for example, females desiring a strong male partner. The same can also be said for the human race with the idea of 'evolution' and the scientific exploration of this. He then goes on to say her gaze paused on his "short neck, thick and powerful". Again, he specifically points out Laurent's broad body parts, emphasizing the attraction that is drawn from the features of this single man by use of describing these very animalistic qualities. The reader is obliged to think that now that Laurent has stepped in with his potential for protection, Thérèse is able to act out in whatever way she pleases, as she now sees somebody who appears to be

dominant and possess control. It is clear that her wanting of this type of male figure in her life has presented a significant change in how she goes about herself as well as the actions she decides to carry out as it is apparent she was prevailed upon by her desire for Laurent and disgust for Camille to commit to his murder. Having contact with this sanguine sensibility had also caused her to acquire a state of equilibrium between her need for expression and her concealment, giving her more control.

Zola stresses that temperaments, when unbalanced, can be dangerous and cause disruption to a person's well-being. Zola addresses this idea with the use of Thérèse when, after they had killed Camille and Thérèse was ill, Zola says she was in a state of "listless and nervous pain" and that she had "retreated into herself", much like an animal with "silent feelings of despair"(99). We establish that Thérèse no longer has control over her well-being. Zola uses her choice of actions, which were to help kill Camille as a means of selfishness, causing her much confusion and ultimately draining her desire to have a future with Laurent. This imbalance which Thérèse experiences brings us to the realization that "She had only loved with her blood and her nerves"(82) and her ineffective decision to go with her mind rather than her instincts has brought much disruption to her temperament. Therefore, her lack of control leaves her in a state of angst, putting her back in a position where she started. Zola also writes that "She was still the unmanageable creature who wanted to wrestle with The Seine"(83). This implies Thérèse's still present incapability to possess control over herself has left her lost in her thoughts of having a future with Laurent, as Zola states, the result of this combination is the "profound disturbance of a sanguine

nature when it comes into contact with a nervous one" (Preface to the Second Edition, page 4). We can see that throughout the novel, he makes an example out of Thérèse's choice of actions.

Thérèse is a character that is quite easily influenced and it is clear that certain restrictions in life that she has faced have groomed her in this way. We establish this from the nature of her upbringing and her developed thirst for adventure, as she has clearly been deprived of excitement in her years of living with Mme Raquin. It is no coincidence that this lack of exploration has taught Thérèse to conceal her instincts and emotions (naturalistic qualities), and so for the whole in her earlier life, Zola has presented her to be a woman 'unleashed', having a 'passionate existence'(16) and the need to thrive with someone who is compatible with her temperament, which is safe to argue, may not have been hers if she was not so secluded in this way from constraint in her upbringing. This is comparable to the likes of an animal, which Zola depicts this (and other) character(s) to be through his 'scientific' method on Thérèse in the novel.