

'j'accuse', open letter
by Émile zola



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'J'accuse' extracts 3 and 4, Emile Zola

The open letter 'J'accuse', composed by Émile Zola, was published in the French newspaper 'L'Aurore' on the 13th January 1898. Addressed to the French president Félix Faure, the letter accused the French government of anti-Semitism as well as the lawless imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French army general staff officer who was condemned for espionage. Zola was born in April 1840 in Paris and is considered as the founder of the naturalist movement in 19th century literature. He was known for contesting the widespread anti-Semitism which plagued 19th century France, through his articles such as 'Pour les Juifs', published in May 1896. In his letter, 'J'accuse', Zola addresses judicial faults as well as the lack of evidence concerning the case, risking his career in order to support justice. After the publication of 'J'accuse', Zola was accused of Libel and was forced to flee France in 1898, however returned. Dreyfus was eventually exonerated in 1906 and was awarded the cross of the 'Légion d'honneur', a military merit. This commentary will first consider the relationship between the French and the Jews in 19th century France. Secondly, the axiomatic irony as well as the idea of faith and hope surrounding the affair and finally the injustice concerning Zola and Dreyfus' punishments.

Dreyfus was condemned largely because handwriting experts claimed that the lack of similarity between Dreyfus' writing and that on the letter which was found was proof of self-forgery. However, in the 19th century, France was experiencing a period of considerable anti-Semitism. This is addressed in Dorian Bells 'Beyond the Bourse' (2011: 102). Here, she argues that the

financial crash acted as a 'trigger for the wave of anti-Semitism that swept over the country during the remainder of the decade'. Furthermore, she cites Saccard who blamed banks failure on the 'sale Juif'. This undeniable anti-Semitism is debated in 'J'accuse', where Zola elucidates 'l'odieux antisémitisme, don't la grande France libérale des droits de l'homme mourra, si elle n'en est pas guérie' (extract 4, 306-308). He determines 'c'est un crime, enfin, que de faire du sabre le dieu moderne' (E4, 308) and forcibly compares this injustice to the fact that France should be working towards 'l'œuvre prochaine de vérité et de justice' (E4, 310). The word 'crime' is used several times in extract 4, which vigorously enforces the idea that the French government are not exempt from the general law and their actions are, in fact criminal. This contrast between crime and the idea of truth and justice neatly proposes the dilemma that France cannot progress as a country whilst the government pursue to misshape public opinion. By eluding to the rights of man, Zola suggests that France might regress to a time when the rights of man had not yet been established, threatening the entire foundation on which France has been established. Although 'J'accuse' is a letter addressed to the president, Zola eludes to the public when he writes 'c'est un crime encore que de s'être appuyé sur la presse immonde', suggesting that the French public are partially to blame for the barbarous and unlawful imprisonment of Dreyfus, by trusting the exclamations of the press. However, Zola goes on to recount that the public opinion has been poisoned by 'la fripouille de Paris', intensely compelling the public to comprehend the violation which has been undertaken by the government and demanding sympathy to the innocent Dreyfus who was punished for a crime which he did not commit.

The reoccurring concept of 'faith', 'justice' and 'hope' is introduced in Michael Burns' 'Dreyfus: A Family Affair', in which Burns focuses largely on the letters written by Dreyfus during his time in prison. He writes 'I ask for no mercy, but I demand the justice which is the common right of every human being' (176), as well as the repeated sentiment of the 'truth' and 'light' which would, at some point, be uncovered. (177). This perception of justice and truth is emulated in extract 3 of 'J'accuse', where Zola writes 'puisque'ils ne peuvent laisser reconnaître l'innocence de Dreyfus, sans que les bureaux de la guerre croulent dans le mépris public'(211-212). This indisputable miscarriage of truth presents a clear contrast to the faith and belief that Dreyfus describes in his letters. Zola's exasperation is palpable when he addresses the reader by questioning 'Mais, grand Dieu! pourquoi? dans quel but? Donnez un motif'(216-217). By proposing this series of questions to the reader, Zola demands the audience to consider the affair logically. He contests here that the anecdote recited by the press does not make sense and therefore he asks the reader to understand that the government have concocted a falsified story to protect their reputation. Through Zola's representation of the affair in 'J'accuse', we can understand the irony of the situation. Anti-Semitism in 19th century France depicts Jews as a race who lie and present complications, whereas the government is entrusted to bring law, order and justice to a country. The presentation of these parties throughout the Dreyfus affair proves these stereotypes to be forcefully incorrect. He reinforces this idea as he writes 'Quand une société en est là, elle tombe en decomposition' (221), further presenting the idea that the lies told by the government will eventually result in the destruction of the French society.

The injustice which surrounded the Dreyfus affair is discussed in Martin. P. Johnson's 'The Dreyfus Affair' where he examines Zola's trial. He writes that 'Zola and his editor were charged with libel only for having asserted that the judges in the Esterhazy trial had been ordered to vote for acquittal' (page 91), further proving that innocent people were being punished for attempting to bring justice to the affair. This is further seen when Johnson focuses on the fact that Dreyfus' wife was not allowed to respond, 'when asked if she thought Zola's article was in good faith'. This obvious violation of the law shows the lengths employed by the government in order to mask the truth and to punish Zola for attempting to uncover the crimes committed by the French government. This can therefore be linked to the injustice which Dreyfus faced - neither man had committed a crime and yet both were punished for attempting to expose the truth. Zola further discusses this idea of falsifying the truth where he writes 'et le beau résultat de cette situation prodigieuse est que l'honnête homme, là-dedans, le lieutenant-colonel Picquart, qui seul a fait son devoir, va être la victime, celui qu'on bafouera et qu'on punira' (Extract 3, 212-214). Here, the reader is once again challenged to question the validity of the information provided to them. He highlights the irony of the situation where the honest man is punished; something which would later come to affect Zola himself. Once again, Zola addresses the misshapen truth when he reprimands the actions of the French by saying 'voilà la fripouille qui triomphe insolemment, dans la défaite du droit et de la simple probité' (extract 4, 300-301). Here he reminds the audience of the false and vile accusations made against Dreyfus, therefore reinforcing the idea of Dreyfus' innocence in the affair, yet his inequitable suffering.

In conclusion, the forceful and direct way in which Zola addresses his audience as well as the president through the sustained use of the word 'crime' whilst eluding to the miscarriage of truth enforces the severity and injustice of the situation. By suggesting that the French society is partially to blame for this falsification, Zola invites the reader to partake in amending the wrongdoing which was being carried out. In his letter, Zola was able to effectively highlight the undeniable calamity which was the Dreyfus affair whilst suggesting that the behaviour portrayed by the French government would, if continued, inevitably destroy France, a country which should be working towards truth and justice. Zola's letter was not only used in order to address Dreyfus' case, but also to highlight the extent to which anti-Semitism was affecting the country. It was thanks to the efforts of Zola as well as other Dreyfusards that Dreyfus's innocence was eventually pronounced indisputable, illustrating the undeniable miscarriage of justice which enveloped the Dreyfus affair.

Bibliography

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