

Meta-art, exorcism, and existentialism in the masterpiece



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Jeffrey S. UzzelDr. Katarina GephardtEnglish 448029 November 2007“ Meta-Art, Exorcism, and Existentialism in The Masterpiece” The Masterpiece is perhaps the most blatantly autobiographical work in Emile Zola’s Rougon-Macquart series. In the novel, Zola illustrates the plight of the suffering artist. He uses descriptive language to imitate the artistic style of his characters, thereby creating the impression of meta-art. In effect, the novel is a vehicle of self-reflection. By tracing Claude’s “ bitter disappointments, perpetual groping, and painful doubts,” Zola appears to be exorcising his own personal and artistic demons (Zamparelli 155). Sandoz, on the other hand, represents Zola’s disillusionment and resignation to the grim reality of life. Zola, like Sandoz, approaches the fin de siecle with a somber estimation of the human condition, relying on Naturalism and “ the cold light of science” to survive the terrors of existentialism (Zola 422). Emile Zola consciously intended The Masterpiece to be a work of meta-art: “ I not only wrote in favor of the impressionists, I translated them into literature, in my style, tone, coloration, the palette I used in many of my descriptions ... the painters have helped me paint in a new manner, literarily...” (qtd. in Knapp 123). Zola’s unique style is evident in his striking descriptions of Paris seen through the artist’s eye. After the first exhibition of ‘ Open Air’ at the Salon des Refusés, Claude steps outside and marvels at the aesthetics of the city: Beyond the belt of dark green shadow under the two double rows of chestnut trees, the sunlight roadway of the Avenue lay before them, and they could see Paris going by in a cloud of glory, the carriages with wheels like radiant stars, the green yellow omnibuses more heavily gilded than triumphal cars, riders whose glossy mounts seemed to shoot out sparks, while the very passers-by were transfigured and resplendent in the blaze of the sun. (Zola <https://assignbuster.com/meta-art-exorcism-and-existentialism-in-the-masterpiece/>)

148) Zola's illustration of this scene demonstrates his ability to transpose the artist's imagination into literature. Like Claude, he often uses bold colors to 'paint' the scene. The "dark green" of the trees merges with the "green yellow omnibuses" and finally bursts into "the blaze of the sun," imitating the actual blending of green and yellow paint on a canvas. Zola uses "the implements of the artist" to create these brilliant images, revealing the world seen through the painter's eyes (Knapp 130). This approach to the novel is highly significant, as it illuminates the fact that *The Masterpiece* is a work of art in which the artistic process is reflected. The novel echoes "[Zola's] own agonies in the incessant creative labor," creating a double edged sword with which he attempts to slay the dragon of Romanticism (Hemmings 212).

Claude Lantier and Pierre Sandoz represent the struggles and triumphs of Zola's creative genius. By dividing his artistic psyche into these two characters, "Zola bared his deepest fears and beliefs to our gaze" (King 211). Claude and Sandoz are not polar opposites, as they share many of the same values and aspirations, but there are important differences in their approaches to art and life. Both are plagued by harsh criticism and self-doubt, but while Claude buckles under pressure, Sandoz fights his way through it. Claude embodies Zola's doubts and fears, whereas Sandoz is a projection of his rational intellect. Thus, Zola manifests his subconscious mind in Claude and his conscious mind in Sandoz. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Claude is a representation of Zola's dark side. Like the suffering painter, Zola was often the victim of his own self-criticism and hopelessness: "For Zola, despair was always just around the corner and he was, throughout most of his creative life, a very unhappy man" (King 202). It

is difficult to believe that Zola could have portrayed Claude's anguish so

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powerfully without drawing from personal experience. In his *Ebauche*, Zola states that *The Masterpiece* reflects his “own intimate life as a creative artist, the perpetual pangs of childbirth” (qtd. in Grant 132). This is evident in Claude’s struggles to transfer his grandiose visions to the canvas: “Could there be something wrong with his eyes that impaired his vision? Were his hands no longer his, since they refused to carry out his intentions?” (Zola 52). Claude is a literary conduit of the self-destructive obsessions which dominate Zola’s subconscious. Therefore, his suicide at the end of the novel can be seen as an attempt by Zola to “shed his sickness” with *The Masterpiece* (Niess 77). Whereas Claude is a manifestation of Zola’s subconscious fears, Sandoz is clearly the mouthpiece of his intellectual and philosophical ideas. The series of novels which Sandoz writes is a blatant parallel of the *Rougon-Macquart* series: “Sandoz is a novelist, a Naturalistic novelist, and through him Zola defines the essence of his novels” (Grant 136). When Sandoz visits Claude at Bennecourt, he discloses his literary vision: “This is the idea: to study man as he really is. Not this metaphysical marionette they’ve made us believe he is, but the physiological human being, determined by his surroundings, motivated by the functioning of his organs ... That’s the point we start from, the only possible basis for our modern revolution” (Zola 180). In many ways, this is exactly what *The Masterpiece* achieves: an unfiltered representation of the suffering artist with human fears in his head and red blood in his veins. Zola put so much of himself into Sandoz that he “came to represent in Zola’s own mind something very much like a complete intellectual and psychological, as well as a physical, self portrait” (Niess 69). The autobiographical nature of *The Masterpiece* is important because it provides the means for self-reflection. In <https://assignbuster.com/meta-art-exorcism-and-existentialism-in-the-masterpiece/>

the final chapter, Zola uses Sandoz to discuss several underlying themes of the novel. One of the most important issues is the effect of “ the fatal malady of romanticism” on art and society (Zamparelli 145). Zola himself admitted to his contemporaries that “ all of us today, even those of us who are passionate for exact truth, are gangrened to the marrow with romanticism” (qtd. in Niess 71-72). Throughout the novel, Romanticism is portrayed as a kind of poison which lingers in the minds of young artists. Sandoz blames this ‘ poison’ for Claude’s death: “ he was the victim of his period. The generation we belong to was brought up on Romanticism; it soaked into us and we can do nothing about it. It’s all very well our plunging head first into violent reality, the stain remains and all the scrubbing in the world will never remove it” (Zola 419). Claude was caught in-between two drastically antagonistic movements, Romanticism and Naturalism, which tore him apart mentally. Zola expresses his torment as an artist in the midst of this stylistic battle: “ In 1885-86 realism and naturalism were entering a period of stress, and Zola, with his amazing intuitional grasp of contemporary forces and movements, knew it” (Niess 246). Thus, in relating his own experiences through Claude and Sandoz, Zola sends out a warning against the dangers of Romantic idealism and mysticism. Sandoz and Zola rely on Naturalism and Science to combat these archaic forces, holding to the “ belief in the observable as the only valid source of inspiration” (Niess 246). The problem with Claude’s final attempt to create a masterpiece is that it is inspired by his imagination rather than nature. Sandoz recognizes this fact and pleads with Claude to see the folly of painting a nude woman in the middle of the city: “ How, he asked, could a modern painter, who took pride in painting nothing but reality, jeopardize the originality of his work by

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introducing such obvious products of the imagination?" (Zola 271). Claude's digression back to Romanticism contradicts the Naturalism of his revolutionary artistic vision, creating the internal battle which unhinges his mind and drives him to suicide. His death is a prophetic warning against the return of Romanticism in society during the late 1800s which threatened the recent prominence of Naturalism and Science. In response to this threat, Zola maintained that "life alone speaks of life, truth and beauty arise only from living nature" (qtd. in Niess 247). He broadcasts this important message through Sandoz, who serves as the instrument of Zola's intellect. The final chapter of the novel is essentially a "revelation of the state of Zola's soul" (Niess 247). Sandoz and Bongrand discuss Claude's life and death, portraying the grim reality of the artist's existence. Their conversation demonstrates "Zola's sympathy with and understanding of human frailty," which raises important philosophical questions (Grant 137). What is the meaning of life? The purpose of art? Who is the artist? The events in the novel indicate Zola's quasi-nihilistic view of the human condition: "Nearly every act is useless, vain, pointless; honesty and integrity bring only derision; love dies and with it all possibility of beauty" (Niess 248). This pessimistic attitude reflects Zola's own, and the novel is a manifestation of his hopeless vision of the artist. As *The Masterpiece* progresses, Claude's obsession with painting is "transformed into a kind of monster who devours everything that is not art" (Zamparelli 152). Thus, Zola portrays the artist as the victim of a fruitless monomania, and Claude's will to create "Life! Life! Life!" ultimately prevents him from living (Zola 86). As an autobiographical work of meta-art, *The Masterpiece* provides an unique view into Emile Zola's personal struggles with the creative process. Zola's bleak portrayal of the

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suffering artist is indicative of a distinctly pessimistic outlook, for which he provides only one solution: work. For Zola and Sandoz, “work is the supreme refuge and consolation of the strong” (Grant 137). In the end of the novel, Sandoz “turns to work and action as the only means of combating the metaphysical weariness and the destructive fin de siècle idealism” (Zamparelli 148). Work is Zola’s prescription for the suffering of life, the only meaning one can ascribe to a meaningless world. The artist must be aware of his own limitations and resign himself to the fact that glory is seldom attained... that he is much more likely to be conquered by Paris than the other way around. This is Zola’s message in *The Masterpiece*; the clarion call to usher in an age of Reason and Naturalism.

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