

# [Zola’s use of the color red in germinal](https://assignbuster.com/zolas-use-of-the-color-red-in-germinal/)

As a naturalist, Emile Zola’s use of symbolism is often eschewed in favor of his overall themes and plots. Zola believed in the strictly observational approach to novels and his novels set out to depict the industrialization of sex, violence, alcoholism and exploitation. Germinal was a great source of pride for Zola in his realistic depiction of mining. Yet, throughout the book, the liberal use of color in order to depict mood and scene proliferates until the symbolism becomes as important as the depiction of the interplay between the working class and the mine owners. While the color black is the most prominent color and should be the most prominent color in Germinal, the color red has much more to tell us about the symbolic nature of the novel.

The first instance of red occurs early in the book when the protagonist sees the “ red glow of three braziers, burning apparently suspended in mid-air.” (5) Red as a source of heat is beneficial in these early passages as it provides a source of heat for the cold traveler and then becomes “ red cooking pot.” (16)

The red soon takes a sinister quality as the light of the brazier sends “ blood-red reflections dancing along the filthy woodwork and up on the ceiling, which was stained with black dust.” (29) At this point, the color red becomes the color of Hell that throws sharp lights upon all around it. These blood-red reflections that highlight the filth and the black dust also reveal others. A character is looking the protagonist “ up and down in the red light of the furnace which lit them.” (31) When miners come back from the mines, they are greeted by cooking where “ the stove was red-hot, and the great windowless room seemed ablaze.” (63) Thus, the lives of the miners are so proscribed that their source of solace is fraught with dangers and murderous symbolism. Blood and revelation mixed with the potential for the destructive force that red depicts. Red has long been a color of revolutions – either as part of a tricolor depiction or as a Communist trope. Yet, these revolutions are destructive forces that kill just as many people as they save. The destruction of the existing order may tear away the exploitive excesses but it also creates a great danger than can swallow everything.

Yet for all its illuminating properties, the red cannot fight against the gloom for long. The fact that the red can be a source of light – either for benefice or sinister intentions does not keep it from being whelmed by the darkness. The blackness can overwhelm the red as the lamps are depicted as failing “ to penetrate the gloom with their small red glow.” (40) In the mines, the miners come down and there is no place for red except as phantoms. In the solitude of the mine, “ they saw some red sparks disappearing round a bend in the tunnel in the distance.” These red sparks act like ghosts of hope that make the overall gloom and despair that much worse.

This theme continues throughout the book with red and black fighting for supremacy. Black is the color of the normalized lives with black soot and black mines that dominate the lives of the miners and the citizens. Red is the color of violence and heat, but it is either symbolic of the danger in the miners’ live or woefully inadequate in the task of warming them. There is either too much or too little red. Not the juxtaposition in the following passage: “ were blue flames from the blast-furnaces and red flames from the coke ovens. Gradually everything became drowned in darkness” (132). The red is merely remarked upon as something to provide brightness against the engulfing darkness.

In very rare instances, red and black is in balance. When the miners go down into the mine on a normal day, Zola states: “ On each tub they had hung a lamp, shining like a red star. Then behind them came a line of miners, some fifty shadowy figures” (189).

This represents a rare moment in the novel as the red is used as a guidepost without being in competition with the black. They are in the same accordance that the managers imagine as the working relationship between management and labor.

The trope of black and red in balance is more prominent when the red and the black are not naturally occurring phenomenon. When describing a modern plant with up-to-date scientific perfection and hints of elegance, Zola notes that “ the engine-house had the curved forms of a Renaissance chapel, adorned by a chimney whose black and red bricks were patterned with a spiral mosaic” (298). The idealism of black and red melded together in a perfect engineering feet belies the tensions between the naturally occurring black of the soot and the red of the fires.

Yet, the engineering feet of black and red in balance becomes illusory and red takes over the narrative in the form of a mystical connotation where the natural has been repressed by the balance for only so long. The Apollonian balance of black and white can only continue for so long before the raging id that red represents comes burning through the surface.

In one of the more striking passages, the association of red with Hell and war comes out and washes over the narrative. For a few sentences, the dispassionate observational approach disintegrates in a symbolic passage: “ So they made a detour. Tartarus, on the edge of the woods, was an uncultivated moor, whose sterile volcanic soil had lain for centuries over a burning coal-mine. Its history was lost in the mists of time, and the local miners told the tale of how a bolt from the heavens had fallen on this Sodom in the bowels of the earth, where the tram girls were guilty of the vilest abominations; it had happened so quickly that they had been unable to get back up to the surface, and still today they were roasting in their hell down below. The dark red, scorched rocks were covered in a leprous growth of alum. Sulphur grew like yellow flowers round the lips of the fissures in the rock. At night the foolhardy who risked their eyes to look through these cracks swore that they could see flames, and criminals’ souls crackling on the burning coals deep within. Wandering lights ran over the surface, and there was a constant stream of hot, poisonous vapors, rank with fecal stench of this devil’s kitchen” (303-304).

Shortly after this passage, workers are described as “ blazing red in the reflection of the fire, sweating and disheveled from this witch’s Sabbath” (323). Even though the red descriptions go back to some fairly normal descriptors such as red faces and red trousers, the overall state of the color red is associated with the colors of Hell and demonism, which set the stage for the final violent and deadly ending.

While Zola set out to write a natural book, his use of colors – particularly the color red- indicates his ability to use mythological and bathetic imagery in order to depict a world in which the demonic and the natural are in constant flux with tensions between stability and chaos allowing for some stability before the ultimate opening up of the hell gate and the flood of insanity.