

Free essay on against the grain - an obsession with nausea

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Introduction:

Huysman's novel is an interesting and almost fateful indictment of Parisian society which focuses on the artificial and artistic collections with several aesthetic conundrums although the end result is surely quite agreeable.

Huysman examines the decline of the aristocratic Jean Des Esseintes who is a recluse in his own world of art and decadence with a retrospect of the past in the salons of Paris.

In a way this novel is rather reminiscent of Marcel Proust's 'Remembrance of Things Past' which also focuses on nostalgia and intellectual experiences.

The main character Jean Des Esseintes is full of remorse and unhappiness at his debauched life in Paris which gave him nothing but unhappiness and pain.

In the beginning of Chapter 13 we begin to see how Des Esseintes is slowly rejecting his former life and going mad;

"Half naked, he opened a window and received the air like a furnace blast in his face. The dining room, to which he fled, was fiery, and the rarefied air simmered. Utterly distressed, he sat down, for the stimulation that had seized him had ended since the close of his reveries. Like all people tormented by nervousness, heat distracted him. And his anaemia, checked by cold weather, again became pronounced, weakening his body which had been debilitated by copious perspiration".

There is also a lot of intellectual experimentation in the novel which demonstrates how a person can descend into the maelstrom of his/her own thoughts. The intellectual experiments which Des Esseintes conducts also demonstrate a certain remorse for what he has done in the past which also

shows a directness in speech and innermost thought. De Esseinte's nausea is perhaps the most important element in the last three chapters of the book.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this novel is the comparison with Proust in 'Remembrance of Things Past'. Here one can compare the Swann family to the main character since they are pretty much in the same boat financially and have also descended into debauchery and ugliness. This seemed to be the life of the aristocratic family in Paris in those days where they then retreated to the country to continue in their own ways.

Proust is perhaps more scathing and direct than Huysman in his critical indictment of Parisian society and the aristocracy. One can learn that this sort of life was something which went on pretty regularly at the time and which also had a certain effect on the character's moral upbringing. The subtle and intimate nuances which are part and parcel of Esseinte's character are visually demonstrated in every single way.

However the most interesting aspect of Des Esseinte's focus is his total and utter contempt for French Romantic literature which is a bit strange when one considers what is going on in the France of his day. Here the Proustian parallel comes to the fore as he writes with a flair and intensity on the past where he eventually converts to Christianity. This leitmotif runs through Des Esseinte's analysis although his appreciation of Gustav Moreau and Flaubert are subtle and very intriguing at the same time.

Nausea seems to be something which is constantly imbued in the mind of Des Esseintes who roams the streets of Paris searching for scents and fragrances which recreate a sensual touch as he continually descends into the maelstrom of self-despair. This incredible and fantastic vision is subtly to

be compared to other French authors' similar experimentation in the dabbling of such tasks. One has to compare the symbolism which is found in the plays of Moliere and which was brought so vividly to life by Lully and Rameu in their musical tableaux. Yet again we have a return to the senseless debauchery which permeated French aristocratic society at the time and which showed how everything was changing for the worse as the Revolution drew closer.

The beauty of women in this sense afforded a creativity which eventually disappeared into the echelons of age, without much ado, he was moving forward into the depths of the abyss. The study of Moreau's paintings and the garden of poisonous flowers are another case in point which shows how life has intrinsically changed for Des Esseintes.

This interesting quote also demonstrates how De Esseintes was slowly beginning to grasp the religion and spirituality of his childhood although his library was still an utter maelstrom of disaster;

" In the torpor and listless ennui in which he was sunk, the disorder of his library, whose arrangement had never been completed, irritated him.

Helpless in his armchair, he had constantly in sight the books set awry on the shelves propped against each other or lying flat on their sides, like a tumbled pack of cards. This disorder offended him the more when he contrasted it with the perfect order of his religious works, carefully placed on parade along the walls".

The natural decadence into which Des Esseintes descended was perhaps a by product of the centuries of abuse systematically meted out on the poor by the rich and the aristocratic classes. A comparison with Jean Paul Sartre's '

Nausea' is instructive here as both authors descend into similarly horrifying senses of repulsion with regard to the lower classes.

Here Des Esseintes becomes obsessed with Baudelaire and delves even deeper into that fantastical world of the novel writer.

“ And the more Des Esseintes read Baudelaire, the more he felt the ineffable charm of this writer who, in an age when verse served only to portray the external semblance of beings and things, had succeeded in expressing the inexpressible in a muscular and brawny language; who, more than any other writer possessed a marvellous power to define with a strange robustness of expression, the most fugitive and tentative morbidities of exhausted minds and sad souls”.

One also has to observe the social context in the 1820's in France as this was now beginning to come to terms with the revolution's implications and also the possible restoration of the monarchy. The Reign of Terror was over and had long gone and the country was going through a phase of political and social instability with the old ' values' being hearkened upon. Leftist tendencies were seen by reactionaries as damaging to the country's overall stability so there was an emphasis on putting the order back into society. De Esseintes is something of a reactionary in this sense as he shows that he cannot really tolerate the poor and the unwashed and is only intrinsically interested in his inner circle of art and literature whilst occasionally spilling out into the realms of the exotic such as the exploration of the occult in the forms of flowers, perfumes and other terrifying substances.

Conclusion: Against the Grain as a novel full of surrealism

Huysman's novel is certainly a powerful and hugely intriguing work which focuses on the creation of a situation where beauty is flawed and without any hope. The character of Des Esseintes is strangely harrowing in the sense that there is nothing much one can do when the past is brought up as this has gone forever and can never come back.

Des Essaintes rediscovers God in the final stages of the book where he feels constantly at one with that Being who created him.

Des Esseintes eventual conversion back to Christianity is an enigmatic part of the novel and the ending is as open ended as possible. The comparison with Charles Dickens is also extremely instructive and very fine in every aspect, demonstrating the wonderful nature of that literary genius. Although life is problematic in that respect, Huysman manages to come to a point where the reader accepts De Esseintes' fate in a philosophical and resigned way.

The conclusion of the book is pure mastery.

“ An access of rage swept aside, like a hurricane, his attempts at resignation and indifference. He could no longer conceal the hideous truth--nothing was left, all was in ruins. The bourgeoisie were gormandizing on the solemn ruins of the Church which had become a place of rendez-vous, a mass of rubbish, soiled by petty puns and scandalous jests. Were the terrible God of Genesis and the Pale Christ of Golgotha not going to prove their existence by commanding the cataclysms of yore, by rekindling the flames that once consumed the sinful cities? Was this

degradation to continue to flow and cover with its pestilence the old world planted with seeds of iniquities and shames?"

Works cited:

Huysmans: Against Nature translated by Brendan King (Dedalus Books, 2008)