

Tensions between culture, social norms and family expectations



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In *Thérèse Raquin*, Zola creates bodies criss-crossed by tension through contrasting his characters' temperaments (the "natural" self) with their outward surroundings and circumstances (social norms, family expectations). It is the stark contrast between Thérèse's mask of indifference and inner « sang africain » that creates extreme bodily tension when faced with her familial expectations, causing her to embark on a murderous love affair with Laurent. For Laurent, his sanguine, primal nature contrasted with the social norms associated with Parisian poverty force him to satiate his fleshy desires in Thérèse's arms, creating tension when faced with Thérèse's ardent, desperate love-making, foreshadowing the events to come. Madame Raquin is of particular interest, as one of the few characters that is in a position of power, and thus encounters less dissension between her choleric nature and culture, as she is the deity dictating the family expectations and norms. Finally, Camille's bodily tension is established through his desperation to be autonomous, frantically trying to deny his natural, phlegmatic self in order to fulfill his own idea of what constitutes a cultural norm and expectation. Through characterization, Zola seeks to show us how naturalism and human instinct ultimately trump culture and surroundings, culminating in the only morbid ending that a novel with these types of personalities could have. Thérèse is the quintessential example of a character leading a "double life", in a constant state of tension between her act of supreme passivity and obedience, and her vicious, animalistic "natural" self. The daughter of a North African woman and a French sea captain with « le sang de sa mère », Thérèse possesses a passionate and impulsive personality but is forced to conceal her wild temperament when confined to a dull, predictable childhood

alongside Camille and Madame Raquin. « Elle vécut intérieurement une existence brûlante et emportée...elle se couchait à plat ventre comme une bête, les yeux noirs et agrandis, le corps tordu, près de bondir. » Zola's use of animalistic imagery conveys Thérèse's natural instinct as a woman of fiery temperament, flexed and ready to pounce. The tension between this "natural self" and her desperation to free herself from the confined prison of Camille's meagre and sickly disposition and Madame Raquin's selfish, controlling expectations culminates in Thérèse's lovemaking and murderous scheme with Laurent. Forced to remain « silencieuse et muette », Thérèse is expected to fulfil her familial expectations, as essentially Camille's carer, and to follow the social norms of her surroundings, as demonstrated in the Thursday evening domino soirées, where she pretends to sit along attentively, secretly desperate for a respite from the lifeless guests and dreary conversation.

Dominated by the tension between these expectations and her natural nerves and blood, Zola shows the reader how temperament ultimately triumph's over Thérèse's actions, as she becomes governed by her flesh and natural instincts, leading her into the arms of Laurent, as « la nature et les circonstances...les avoir poussés l'un vers l'autre. » This idea coincides with Zola's overarching theme of naturalism, with the characters' behavior based on inherited traits, rather than the cultural circumstances imposed upon them. Although not as strictly dictated upon by social and familial expectations as Thérèse, Laurent also exemplifies bodily tensions between his sanguine instincts, and the culture surrounding him. A man of peasant-roots, Laurent exemplifies a man governed by sensual pleasures and primal

needs. He is selfish and of simple logic, always seeking to fulfil the desires of his flesh, in spite of his father's strict expectations of him and the social constraints of Parisian poverty. Laurent is devoted to luxury and in particular, seeks to satiate his appetites with regard to food, women, warmth and money. However, his socio-economic status after being cut off from his peasant father's wealth forces him into the working milieu and it is this culture of poverty that tenses with his desires. This culminates into his plan to become a part of the Raquin family, where a warm meal, lively chatter and the possibility of Thérèse as his mistress lay all too easily at his disposal. Laurent's natural instincts are exemplified through Zola's use of vocabulary when he beholds Thérèse before they make love, « des voluptés cuisantes, une brûlure, une odeur tiède, souple, forte, passionné, les lèvres humides ». Although Zola tries to remain detached as a narrator, in this particular passage the reader is very much planted in the mind of Laurent, as we are forced to identify with his natural instincts. This however, culminates into a strong mood of tension, when this brute-like passion is foreshadowed by his feeling of unease and « souffrance physique ».

Even though Thérèse and Laurent complete each other in their animalistic desires, Laurent's hesitancy hints at the peril and inevitability of being governed by one's instincts. This inevitability is portrayed through Zola's metaphor of Laurent as an « homme ivre », knowing that he will return to Thérèse, regardless of his misgivings. Physically, the tension is marked on Laurent's body in the form of Camille's bite mark, a reoccurring symbol throughout the novel, reminding him of his crime. Finally, the portrayal of Madame Raquin and Camille provides insight into this idea of tension, or in

Madame Raquin's case, lack thereof, between the natural self and family expectations.

Madame Raquin, for the first part of the novel, is one of the few character's who's body is not criss-crossed with tension, as she is the deity that dictates the social norms and familial expectations, which are directly linked to her natural instincts of protection and survival. In stark contrast to Thérèse, Madame Raquin perceived nature is entirely authentic, governed by her dedication to her invalid of a son. Although seemingly good-natured, Madame Raquin is undeniably selfish, rejecting anything that could bring harm to her son, and in doing so, sacrificing the needs of Thérèse. She determines the path of Thérèse's life in marrying her to Camille, assuring that her nerves and worries are eased. Madame Raquin's choleric, task-focused nature is exemplified in her reaction to her son's death, in which she almost seems to be more upset at failing her life task to keep Camille alive, rather than the fact that he has died, « Elle l'avait mis au monde plus de dix fois, elle l'aimait pour tout l'amour qu'elle lui témoignait depuis trente ans. Et voilà qu'il mourait loin d'elle, tout d'un coup, dans l'eau froide et sale, comme un chien. » Here Zola's recurring use of irony is illustrated, as Camille dies once he had finally escaped his sick bed, procuring a job and becoming reasonably self-sufficient. Camille's insistence and desire to become self-sufficient demonstrates his bodily tension between being so phlegmatic and in a constant state of malaise, contrasted with his yearning to live up to the social and cultural norms expected of a man – to have a purpose, a wage and a certain level of intellect.

Camille's natural instinct of sluggishness is highlighted in Zola's use of juxtaposition to describe both his and Laurent's physical appearance. Laurent is " grand, fort...avec son front bas, planté d'une rude chevelure noire, ses joues pleines, ses lèvres rouges, d'une beauté sanguine", contrasted with Camille, " qui tremble toujours de fièvre...petit, chétif, d'allure languissante." Camille possesses a certain level of self-importance, where he sees anyone mildly successful or powerful, such as Laurent, as being admirable and attractive. It is his friendship and trust in Laurent that ultimately leads to Camille's natural self overpowering his determination to be a strong, independent member of society, as he remains weak and feeble when faced with Laurent's brute strength on the boat ride. Regardless of Camille's bodily desire to live up to his idea of the social norm, it is ultimately his phlegmatic instincts that fail him, culminating in the tension of Laurent's betrayal and consequently, the betrayal of his social expectations.

In conclusion, Zola succeeds in showing how temperaments, rather than social norms and cultural, family expectations ultimately triumph over one's actions and determine one's fate. The bodily tensions created in denying one's natural self in favour of fulfilling a social or familial norm, in the case of Thérèse and Camille ultimately lead to Thérèse's fatal love affair and Camille's gruesome death. Madame Raquin's god-like dictatorship over the household ensures her survival in the novel, as she is able to establish a certain level of harmony between her nature and expectations. Laurent, although initially complementing his sanguine nature with his logical scheme, meets the same macabre end as Thérèse, as his extreme guilt and the bodily tension created by Camille's bite on his neck ensures his

progression into a state of insanity. In this way, the reader is left convinced of Zola's portrayal of naturalism and the fatalistic notion of our temperaments and "natural" self ultimately determining our fate, rather than our cultural surroundings.

Works Cited

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