

Working-class

Literature



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WORKING EMILE ZOLA'S GERMINAL Emile Zola's *Germinal* is the thirteenth novel of a twenty book series called "Les Rougon-Macquart" and certainly the most famous. *Germinal*, which is also a month of the revolutionary calendar corresponding to the beginning of spring, takes place in the North of France and describes a general strike in a coal mine.

Naturally, Zola's novel describes working conditions of the coal miners but it would be reducing to consider *Germinal* only as a portrayal of a social class. While reading *Germinal*, it may seem natural to ask ourselves if the way the miners are described reinforces or challenges the assumptions about the working class. However, Zola's talent does not stand in a dualistic description of the workers against the capitalist "bourgeoisie". *Germinal* is a work of art because we are described the different nature of the different classes that composed the French society in the late 19th century.

The workers and the ruling class are both described through three families that have an alter ego on the other side of the social spectrum. The "Levaque": the husband is depicted as a brutal and silly worker whose wife is known for her filth. The "Pierron" are seen as ambitious and hypocritical. The husband encourages her wife to have an affair with one of the managers in order to be well considered by the mine's management. The "Maheu" compared to the other families have few defaults. They are courageous, hard workers and smart. With Etienne Lantier, the hero of the novel, they are considered as the positive characters.

The "Grgoire" are a rich couple who believe that they perform good deeds and help the ones in need but are full of presumptions regarding the working class. The "Deneulin": the husband is the "patron" ("boss") of many mines. His character is double. He seems to understand the problems of the miners

" The worst is that to lower the net prices we ought logically to produce more; otherwise the reduction bears on wages, and the worker is right in saying that he has to pay the damage." (p.) but at the same time, he is merciless. The " Hennebau" are the exact reproduction of the " Maheu" family among the " bourgeoisie"

It is necessary for a better understanding of Zola's description of the working class to see the role of the bourgeois families. At that time, miners were considered as animals without any rights and their social actions neither were respected nor considered as Ms. Hennebau's words to her husband regarding the strike: " Ah! they are on strike," she said quietly, when he had told her. " Well, what has that to do with us We are not going to leave off eating, I suppose" "(p.) The genius of Zola is to present all these families for the reader to understand that the miners' wishes were not so different from the bourgeois'.

Nevertheless, the success of *Germinal* comes from the presentation of a new idea among miners and workers in general: union to pressure management in order to obtain a salary raise. The idea of strike was new at that time and describing miners as willing to create an organization. Zola also introduces the idea that the main problem was to choose how to organize their efforts. Through Etienne Lantier, the question lies in whether to be a Marxist or an Anarchist. What is the best way to defend the workers' rights These ideas are strongly opposing the presumptions regarding the working class.

However, the strike finally fails and the workers are again presented as violent and brutal. Even if we may consider the last part of the book as a coming back to the way of seeing miners at that time, Zola's idea does not stop there. His theory is that the workers need a strong organization and

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even if the movement was stopped there is hope that it will come back. It bears the "germs" of other struggles for the years to come: Men were springing forth, a black avenging army, germinating slowly in the furrows, growing towards the harvests of the next century, and their germination would soon overturn the earth. (last page last sentence)

The edition of *Germinal* used in this essay is available online at: <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/ez/g76.html>