

# Zola's Women: The Case of a Victorian 'Naturalist'

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## ABSTRACT

Emile Zola is remembered as the leader of French Naturalism, an opponent of prejudice, an enemy of the Church, a friend of the working-class and even of women. Through his aesthetic principles based on Science, Truth and Experimentation he claimed to strive for objectivity and proposed his fiction as a faithful reflection of the reality of his time. Yet, an analysis of his thirty-one novels shows that Zola, in fact, devised a new myth of woman, crowding his fiction with mythologized creatures, and creating a "new" idol strangely resembling the Virgin Mary.

The study of Emile Zola's portrayal of female characters is of particular interest to feminists as it questions the major traditional assumptions about his works.

Firstly, Zola's claim to objectivity in his rendering of reality as a Naturalist writer, his esthetic principles based on Science, Truth and Experimentation, his caution in carefully gathering information and documentation on the subject he was dealing with, all seem to make him immune to the extravagant extremes generally attributed to the Romantics in their delineation of female characters. Indeed, Zola was a fierce denouncer of the Romantics and often attacked the "ramblings" of their imaginations. In the precise case of his novel *Nana*, for instance, he claimed to be offering a truthful picture of the prostitute of his time, in opposition to her glorification by such authors as Hugo, Dumas or Mürger, or her vilification by others such as Barrère, Thiboust and Augier.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, Zola is usually perceived as an embodiment of justice and equity to a point where he was described by Anatole France as "a moment in the history of human conscience."

This has to do in part with the stand he took in the famous Dreyfus case. Furthermore, Zola is seen as a friend of the working class whose oppression he exposes in his works, and even as a defender of women. One only need conjure up images of the courageous and exploited Gervaise of *L'Assommoir*, La Maheude and Catherine of *Germinal* or Françoise of *La Terre* to become immediately aware of Zola's sensitivity to the plight of lower class women. In *Au Bonheur des Dames* he even analysed with a great deal of accuracy and foresight the systematic exploitation of both female clientele and the saleswomen by the department stores which had just begun to emerge. In turning to his newspaper articles, it is clearer yet that, on the conscious level, Zola wanted to help introduce reforms in women's favour. In the area of education, for example, he persistently denounced what he perceived to be the negative influence of the Church on girls and women and expressed the desire to see them liberated from the tyranny of religion by the acquisition of basic skills, which emphasized scientific disciplines in the lay public school.<sup>2</sup> He also proposed specific work legislation for the protection of saleswomen and social legislation for that of single mothers.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, within the context of the bourgeois society of his time, Zola seemed to stand almost as a champion of women's rights and many have considered him as such.<sup>4</sup> One would therefore expect his female characters to be revealed in a perspective that shows the admitted desires and ambitions of their naturalistic and socially committed creator. In spite of his avowed theoretical principles, however, Zola's fiction is crowded with such mythologized figures as witches, martyred saintly virgins, and suffering holy mothers. How can one deal with this obvious contradiction between these two opposite views of women? It will help resolve this contradiction if we look at Zola's writing as a deep-seated subconscious, or even unconscious, necessity, and analyse the function and meaning of his female characters within the system of his fiction rather than as reflections of reality. From this new perspective, female characters will be considered mostly in their relationship to men, and perceived in their specificity, i.e., as signifying Sex and the Other according to the theory developed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. As the Other, women characters often embody a rival conscience and constitute a particular danger. As signifiers of Sex, they become the place around which all male fantasms crystallise no matter how contradictory.

As an apparently rather puritanical product of the Victorian era, Zola seems to have harboured a catastrophic view of sexuality. Love is never approached in his novels without tragic consequences. As to sexual relations, the little pleasure they seem to bring is but a miniscule compensation for the suffering they cause. Hence Zola richly invested his female characters with libido, and projected frightful anguish onto them. In fact, whether they refuse their male companions, revolt against their law or, on the contrary, express desire for them, Zola's female characters are inevitably linked with evil and death. Indeed, they often represent the very principle of evil.

The Amazon takes her place alongside shrews and witches among the untamed women to be found in Zola's fiction, and represents but one of the many aspects of the *femme fatale*. She is the absolute Other inasmuch as, not having been 'known' by man, the dangers which lurk within her have had no chance to be neutralised. Flora, a heroine of *La Bête Humaine*, is the best example of this type of woman in Zola's work. This working-class Brunehilde is a strong, healthy and proud young woman; yet she always appears awe-inspiring to the hero, Jacques Lantier. His fearful premonition is right, as her love for him arouses her murderous jealousy. Single-handedly, she stops a six-horse cart on the railroad tracks, thus causing the derailment of a train she thought was carrying Jacques' mistress. Her act provokes the "hatred," the "horror" (RM IV, 1269), the "terrified repulsion one feels for a monster" (1271) in Jacques, who himself is meant to be the neurotic assassin in the novel.

Usually older than the amazons, shrews and witches carry their revolt against male supremacy one step further, despising male love, jeering at men's powers, flouting the patriarchal order. A harpy whose enormous body terrifies both husband and household, Mme. Josserand of *Pot-Bouille* is Zola's prototype of the shrew. In addition to their customary conjugal tormenting these characters usually show a haughty, icy attitude toward their mates. In *Pot-Bouille*, all the wives in the bourgeois residential building which is the center of the action, whether faithful or adulterous, are frigid, a fault which is made to appear as an insult to the virility of their husbands or lovers.

It is the older characters, no longer considered possible love partners, who are most negatively presented. The mother in *Thérèse Raquin* and Mme. Chanteau in *La Joie de Vivre* expect to regulate and judge the character of their sons. Martine and Félicité of *Le Docteur Pascal*, respectively the hero's too credulous servant and his scheming mother, aim at nothing less than

destroying his prestigious scientific work in an attempt to “kill his genius.” In one scene they are described as “witches activating a diabolical fire, for some abomination, the martyrdom of a saint” (RM V, 1203). They are another incarnation of the castrating mother. This figure is best represented in Zola’s work by La Brûlée of *Germinal*, both because of her unusually nightmarish dimensions, and the explicit nature of her act. During the famous strike scene, she plays leader to a “group of galloping furies” (RM III, 1454), who, “teeth and nails out like bitches” (1443) castrate the shopkeeper’s body and parade the shreds of his mutilated flesh in a grotesque procession. From Flore to La Brûlée, from youth to old age, an increase in viciousness is easily discernable; yet the same resistance to masculine hegemony is evident, making of these characters cathartic images of *femmes fatales*.

Even when they are not specifically rebelling against men’s rules, the female characters in Zola’s novels most often embody fertility and are therefore judged negatively, for their contact is perceived as a sordid entrapment in materiality, which provokes uneasiness, repulsion, anxiety or outright flight in the male characters. The painter in *L’Oeuvre*, Claude, refuses to see his aunt Lisa for the odd reason that “her health was too good” (RM IV, 43). Indeed, underneath her quiet appearance lurks what Zola described in his preparatory *Dossiers* to *Le Ventre de Paris* as “a bad angel, wilting and dissolving all she touches” (RM I, 336). The thin, ascetic intellectual, Florent of *Le Ventre de Paris* stands for the spiritual principle. He is contrasted with his meat-seller aunt, a *charcutière* “with the beautifully peaceful face of a sacred cow” (695), and also with the whole troop of fat market women, who assiduously pursue him with their gigantic “charms” in a grotesque pageant, forcing him to “push back his pointed elbows, his narrow shoulders, fearful he might sink into their flesh” (738). These women, representing the material principle, will of course get the better of him by betraying him to the police of the Second Em-

pire. Florent’s nightmares of being engulfed in womanly flesh echo the writings of Schopenhauer on women as nature’s trap, and foreshadow Freud’s description of the fear of castration.

To be a woman is also to be ill, mentally or physically, in Zola’s fiction, for criteria of health are implicitly male and not to be male is not to be well. The source of all the miseries suffered by the Rougon and Macquart families is their ancestor, Adélaïde Fouque, who was locked up in an insane asylum for her sexual aberration; the “fault”<sup>5</sup> has been passed on by her female descendants to her entire lineage. Moreover, Zola’s women seem predisposed to undefined diseases of no specific origin which are perceived as ‘typically feminine.’<sup>6</sup> Thus, all the female inhabitants of the *Pot Bouille* house suffer from vague and varied ‘feminine’ ailments as neurosis, chlorosis, imbecility, neurasthenia, anaemia, etc. What is more surprising is that the only really healthy character in the whole household is the sole representative of the doomed Rougon-Macquart family, Octave Mouret.

It is precisely at puberty that girls start exhibiting symptoms of nervous illness. Jeanne Grandjean’s neurosis in *Une Page d’amour* develops at that time, as does Angéglique’s mystical visions in *Le Rêve*. Hysteria, taken here in its strict etymological sense, is seen as a purely female disease, and, in Zola’s fiction, it seems to coincide with the onset of womanhood. Hence, there is no doubt that these ‘typically feminine’ ailments constitute a deviation, or even an expression of female sexuality. Their manifestations can be diverse and range from madness pure and simple (as in the case of Adélaïde Fouque), to love (Hélène Grandjean in *Une Page d’amour*) extreme piousness (Martha Mouret in *La Conquête de Plassans* or Angélique in *Le Rêve*),<sup>7</sup> or finally to an *inextinguishable urge for speculation or the acquisition of goods, as is the case with La Sandorff (L’Argent)* or the consumers of *Au Bonheur des Dames*. In his preparatory *Doss-*

iers, Zola defined the mania for buying of the department store clients as “a new feminine neurosis”, a “rage for frills and furbelows” constituting “a modern sublimation of other appetites” (RM III, 1676). Conversely, it is remarkable that what could be called the store-owner’s mania for selling is presented not only as normal, but as an important source of social progress and general welfare. Only the female desire to acquire is branded as hysterical. Whatever its expressions, whether deviant or sublimated, women’s desire is perceived as essentially hysterical, abnormal and pathological.

So far, female desire has been seen only as veiled or distorted. When, however, it shows itself in its true colours, when actual sexual relationships between men and women are dealt with openly, there seem to be no bounds to the repulsion and fears experienced by the male characters.

The masculine character—and Zola it would seem—like the hero of *La Confession de Claude* (OC I, 84) feel “full of disgust and fright before the savage beast which [he] had just felt awake [...] within himself.” They then project these feelings onto women, whom they see as devouring lustful monsters. Thus, probably in an effort to absolve a deep-seated guilt, Zola shows his female characters as temptors and initiators in matters of sex or love, even when they are young and “innocent,” like Caroline with Marjolin in *Le Ventre de Paris*, Miette with Silvère in *La Fortune des Rougon*, Albine with Serge in *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, Pauline with Lazare in *La Joie de Vivre*. All of them appear to re-enact the temptation of Adam by Eve.

As an image of “sex made god” (RM II, 1674), Nana not only summarizes all “The lorettes,” prostitutes and courtesans of Zola’s fiction, but even all women who display any sexuality. In the novel *Nana* there are numerous animal metaphors qualifying the heroine, as well as images of dirtiness, stifling narrowness and suffocating

and foul-smelling heat which stigmatize the places associated with her, such as her bed, her bed-chamber, her dressing room, etc. The reactions of fear and fascinated repulsion with regard to femininity are thus made evident. *Femmes fatales* who devour both men and their wealth and who are best represented by Nana, crowd all of Zola’s thirty-one novels. Among the best known are Madeleine Férat, Thérèse Raquin, Renée Saccard (*La Curée*), *Christine (L’Oeuvre)* and *La Cagnette (La Terre)*. These infamous nymphomaniacs exercise the most pernicious influence on men, as do their simply hysterical sisters. Perverted to the marrow of their bones, they soil, debase, ruin, destroy and kill everything around them, leaving in their wake ashes and death. Nana, needless to say is the most efficient of all these she-demons, and the easily identifiable imagery of gluttony is used to delineate her behaviour. In a kind of sexual cannibalism, she massacres her lovers or causes their death indirectly.<sup>8</sup> Herself a “supernatural scourge,” a monstrous and enormous force of destruction, she resembles

those antic monsters whose feared territories were littered with bones [...]. She stepped on skulls [...] while in a halo of glory her sex rose and shone above its outstretched victims like a rising sun lighting up a field of carnage (RM II, 1470).

In due time, the horrible, early putrefaction of the courtesan’s body succeeds in exorcising the menace she represents for the male imagination. These female characters must indeed be punished for the male order to be preserved.

While ‘ideal’ female characters such as Pauline of *La Joie de Vivre*, Caroline of *L’Argent* and Marianne of *Fécondité* seem to enjoy a long life, other heroines, like Nana, are deemed more dangerous and are punished for their ‘crime’ by an early death. Thérèse Raquin and Madéleine Férat commit suicide, haunted as they are by remorse. Renée falls prey to meningitis caused

by guilt over her incestuous relationship with her son-in-law (*La Curée*). Left alone in a squalid garret, Gervaise dies of starvation, as if to expiate her impure life (*L'Assommoir*). Finally, Séverine of *La Bête Humaine* and Françoise of *La Terre* are killed by the very men with whom they had 'sinned.'

Even when they are not explicitly engaged in sexual activities, women characters generally embody the particular evil which each volume purports to denounce, or they are the means by which evil enters the novel. Nana symbolizes, all by herself, the corruption of the Second Empire, the period in which she lives. Marthe's emotional instability in *La Conquête de Plassans* enables the Abbé Faujas to carry out his sordid political scheming. Christine of *L'Oeuvre* effectively kills Claude by forcing him to renounce his painting for her, thus she incarnates all the negative forces of matter which hinder the flight of the artistic spirit. Throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* Zola chooses to castigate power struggles and political intriguing within government circles. The men Eugène Rougon and Aristide Saccard exercise real power, and their genius and generosity excuse or justify their action. Yet, it is their mother, Félicité Rougon who exhibits a lack of scruples and a fierce desire to push her family's way up the social ladder. Similarly, it is two women, La Sandorff and La Méchain, who are unveiled as demons of the Stock Exchange, rather than the real speculators of *L'Argent*, Saccard and Gunderman.<sup>9</sup> Within the lower bourgeoisie Lisa Quenu (*Le Ventre de Paris*) and Mme. Josserand (*Pot-Bouille*) personify the greedy, hypocritical self-righteousness of their class, while their dominated or martyred husbands appear as docile, harmless children. Even in the novels dealing with the lower classes, women seem to be responsible for all the ills of society. The odious and repulsive Mme. Hennebeau of *Germinal* and Fernande of *Travail*, two mine managers' wives, are shown as the exploiters of the working class, while their tormented husbands and lovers are presented as secretly

sympathetic to the cause of the workers. At least they suffer as much as the workers do, if only from psychological pangs, caused by women, of course. As for the lower-class women themselves, they are usually more violent, more brutal and more uncontrollable than their male counterparts and are deliberately shown to be that way. In *Germinal* it is they who first attack the troops, they who seize and maltreat the rich. In the exemplary Maheu couple, he is the more reasonable, more just, more equitable, less hardened, whereas she, ruthlessly punishes her exhausted children (RM III, 1293). Even the downtrodden Gervaise of *L'Assommoir* displays a 'characteristically feminine' weakness for love, tenderness and good food, which will eventually cause her downfall. In short, in every one of Zola's novels, when looking for the character typifying every kind of 'fault,' according to the author's value system, one could easily say: *Cherchez la femme!*<sup>10</sup>

There is however, a chronological development in Zola's novels towards a gradual liberation from this nightmare of the flesh, which should—at least one would hope so—increase the acceptance of the female character within his fiction. For, as Jean Borie has shown,<sup>11</sup> while Zola's early novels are steeped in an atmosphere of doom and decay, later works tend to undergo a slow and anguished metamorphosis, ending finally in the last, messianic texts, in a vision of paradise regained. Zola appears, therefore, to have made a constant, if not conscious, attempt to free himself from the notions of sin and damnation.

This endeavour takes the shape of a revolt against and a departure from the guilt-arousing influence of the Church which Zola considered to be a bastion of sexual puritanism and of misogyny. In order to substitute for the old religious law a new ethic he would devise, Zola felt that women must first be torn away from the Catholic Church and from the control it exercised over them by means of its "educational" system and its practice of confession. He held that "only a

liberated woman [i.e., liberated from religious influence], can, in turn, free man" (*Vérité*, OC VIII, 1373). This resulted in Zola's vigorous campaign both in newspaper articles, and, in a more subdued form, in some of his novels, against what he perceived as the nefarious effects of religion on women. Hence the generally serene atheism of his most 'ideal' heroines, Pauline (*La Joie de Vivre*), Caroline (*L'Argent*), and Marie (*Paris*). Once this first task is achieved, man must be made to convert to the "new religion" of woman and life. Zola's underlying assumption, of course, was that the Church, by seizing upon women, had successfully separated them from men, the better to impose her own tyranny. The adoption of Zola's "new religion" is attempted in the *Rougon-Macquart*, by Octave Mouret in *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Sandoz in *L'Oeuvre* and Pascal in the last novel, which bears his name. However, it is best expressed in *Vérité* and in the series *Les Trois Villes*, which relate a young priest's efforts to throw off the yoke of religion. This he finally accomplishes in the last of the three novels, *Paris*, by marrying Marie and begetting a son—what else? Indeed, Zola's rejection of religion and the Catholic Church curiously results in a pagan glorification of human fertility, a 'new' value which is symbolized by the character of the fertile mother "whose child sanctifies her" (*Travail*, OC VIII), and which comes to supercede the "old" "puritanical" morality of the Church.

Indeed, human fertility appears in the last six novels of Zola as a means of reconciliation, for it justifies sexuality and constitutes a victory over death, the usual enemy. This, in part, explains the frequently noted optimism of Zola's last texts. The exaltation of the fertile mother, occurs in comic, dramatic or parody form in repeated scenes of childbirth in the *Rougon-Macquart*.<sup>12</sup> Yet, it is only in the last volume of this series, *Le Docteur Pascal*, that the praise of maternity becomes ritualised and the figure of the mother sacred. Subsequently biological mothers such as Clotilde (*Le Docteur Pascal*), Marie (*Paris*), and

Marianne (*Fécondité*), can actually be presented as 'ideal,' happy heroines, an achievement which had proved impossible in previous novels.

One could therefore assume that, from then on, women could finally have been accepted within Zola's fiction. Not so! While it is only through the subterfuge of motherhood that they are at all accepted (after *Le Docteur Pascal*) the sterile woman of the same last novels emerges as the new female scapegoat carrying the residual guilt linked to sexuality. She is the proof that manicheism never disappeared from Zola's fiction. The ironically named Sérafine of *Fécondité* is described as a "she wolf" (OC VIII, 47) an "ogress" (249), a "magnificent and atrocious magician" (46) who indulges in "abominably sterile sexual pleasures" (50), which she will, naturally, have to expiate. In her refusal to bear children she undergoes a hysterectomy which results in her suddenly losing her famed beauty and becoming sexually insatiable. In order to avenge herself, she and other women in her situation are shown, in a hallucinatory scene, to have assassinated and castrated the guilty surgeon. A nymphomaniac, a castrating woman, a killer of men and a witch, Sérafine is indeed a new version of the *femme fatale* born again of the ashes of the dead Nana.

While I have employed the expression 'ideal woman' several times, it is questionable whether women can ever really be seen as ideal in Zola's fiction, or presented as positive characters. The novelist's praise and repetition of the theme of chastity shows to what extent the feminine principle is never really accepted in his fiction. In order to bear children, it is almost preferable, as the Abbé Mouret wished it were, "to achieve the triumph of life [...] without the abominable necessity of sex" (*La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* RM I, 1313).

It has often been noted that Zola's very young 'ideal' women die at the dawn of their lives, as if to preserve their precarious state of real or sym-

bolic virginity and to make themselves worthy of their lay sainthood. Furthermore, the remaining few 'ideal' characters who appear in the novels preceding *Le Docteur Pascal* are also precisely those whose sexuality has been minimized, sometimes to the point of being completely obliterated. They may be widows, like Mme. François of *Le Ventre de Paris* or Mme. Hugon of *Nana*, or they may be married, like Mme. Huber of *Le Rêve* and Mme. Weiss of *La Débâcle*. But, in this latter case, their conjugal relations are curiously described as "chaste" or simply never alluded to.

With Henriette Weiss-Levasseur, who is to become a widow during the course of the novel, begins the series of holy women who, like Soeurrette and Suzanne of *Travail*, and, to a lesser extent Caroline of *L'Argent*, seem to have taken vows of chastity, poverty and charity and have entered into religion, so to speak, in the service of a man. Thus, their exemplary lives help redeem their sex and make of them happy sacrifices to man's good conscience. In short, women characters may only appear as positive if they are good mothers, virgins or demurely devoted to a man and even martyred by him or his children, the possession of all those qualities being, of course, most desirable.

This is why all the ideal mothers of Zola's novels preceding *Le Docteur Pascal* are usually adoptive mothers, most often virgins. Lalie (*L'Assommoir*), Denise (*Au Bonheur des Dames*), Alzire and Henriette (*La Débâcle*) are substitute mothers for their younger brothers. Caroline (*L'Argent*) mothers Victor, the son of her lover. The retarded Désirée (*La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*) acts as "the little mother" of all the farm animals who recognize her as such. Finally, Pauline of *La Joie de Vivre* attains the status of sacred virgin mother. She helps give birth to the barely living infant of Louise and Lazare, the man she loves, by breathing life into the baby's sickly lungs, thus succeeding in resuscitating him (RM III, 1102). He is ultimately named Paul, is officially given to Pauline by his father (1129) and

she donates her fortune to him before devoting the rest of her life to raising him. It seems, therefore, that women can only be accepted as ideal or positive characters in Zola's fiction, if they have been somehow deprived of their sexuality, made into "female eunuchs" according to Germaine Greer's famous expression.

It is ironic that Zola, who is well known for his violent vituperations against the Catholic Church, should have inscribed in his own fiction the very values preached by the Church concerning women: chastity and virginity, resignation to the sexual act only for the purpose of procreation. He finally creates a new idol, a virgin-mother whom it is sometimes difficult not to confuse with her sister, the Holy Virgin Mary. Indeed, one could easily argue that the programme of the Church *vis-à-vis* women, as it is expressed by Zola in *Vérité* in order to jeer at the priests, is in fact recreated inadvertently in Zola's own fiction. The narrator of *Vérité* asserts that the Church:

wanted to subdue women in their sex, the ideal woman being deprived of her sex, the Virgin reigning as Queen of the Heavens, thanks to the idiotic miracle of having begotten a child without having ceased to be a virgin (OC VIII 1196).

Clearly, his own portrayal of women often realized this same ideal.

If Zola shared with the Catholic Church so many of its beliefs concerning women and sexuality, why then his well-known aggressiveness against religion? Besides those philosophical reasons which do not pertain to the present study,<sup>13</sup> some accusations made by Zola against religion are worthy of our attention. *La Conquête de Plassans*, *Le Docteur Pascal* and *Vérité* all reproach priests with separating couples, using women as instruments of religious imperialism. In fact, it is the role of Messiah which seems to be at stake; and Zola's struggle with the

Church is one of rivalry over the domination of women.

In order to become God, man must first attempt the miracle which, as the hero of *La Confession de Claude* acknowledges, "Jesus alone was able to work" (OCI, 43), that is to say he must first redeem woman, who is usually guilty of sexual depravity. The theme of the redemption of the fallen woman is present throughout Zola's fiction. It first appears in his earliest novel, *La Confession de Claude*, and constitutes the main plot of four of the five early novels. In the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle the theme is less obvious, but it is implicitly present, nonetheless. To be convinced of it one need only evoke images of Silvère of *La Fortune des Rougon*, who had taken upon himself to accomplish "a holy mission, the redemption, the salvation of the convict's daughter" Miette (RMI, 205), or of Goujet of *L'Assommoir* who does not succeed in his attempt to save Gervaise, or else of Etienne Lantier of *Germinal*, who is Catherine's would-be saviour, as well as that of the working classes she represents. The greatest of the *Rougon-Macquart* saviours is Docteur Pascal whose Christian name points to his redeeming and sacrificial mission. He has succeeded in redeeming himself and his niece Clotilde, in lifting somehow the hereditary curse which weighs upon his family. The *Quatre Evangiles* naturally contain the best and most accomplished examples of saviours. Marc Froment of *Vérité* withdraws his wife, and with her all her female descendants, present and future, from the negative influence of the Church. Luc Froment of *Travail* stoops to marry a fallen woman, raises her to the rank of legitimate wife and extols her as Mother-of-His-Children, having symbolically saved in her person "the misery-stricken proletariat" she embodies (OC VIII, 938). A close examination reveals that in these examples women characters are but an excuse for the redemption, their initial guilt and poverty constituting the necessary prerequisite for the glorification of the triumphant hero-redeemer. Some, like Pascal and

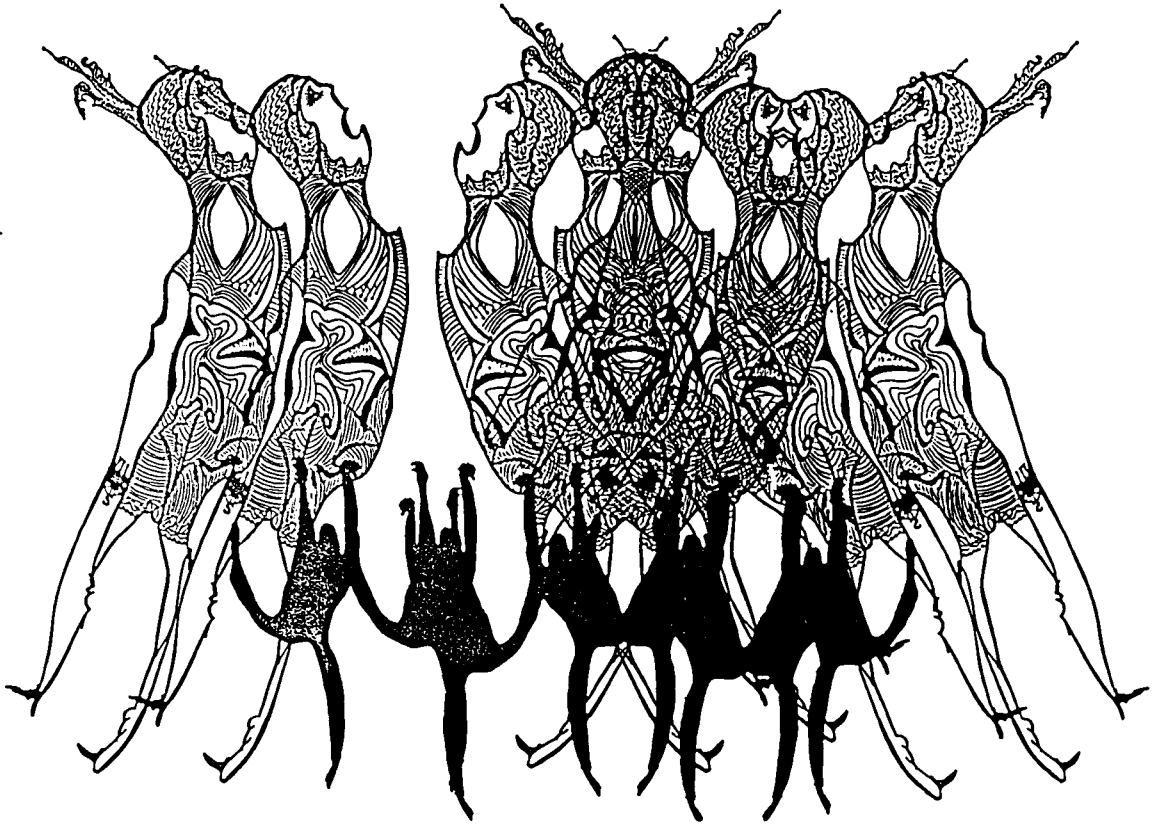
Luc, are adored by their followers during the course of their lives, which are but a parody of Christ's destiny, from passion to immortality.

Once promoted to the rank of all-powerful Messiah, man is now able to attempt the taming of the woman he has just saved. The cult of motherhood has appeared in Zola's work as a means to decrease the evil effects of female sexuality, and at the same time to fight a victorious battle over death. In the same way the menace represented by the Other can be limited, the demonic workings of female sexuality can be stifled, by founding a new utopian society, one of the aims of which is to neutralize or 'pacify' women. Clotilde of *Le Docteur Pascal* is the first in a line of model wives: a perfectly docile and devoted young woman married to, or the companion of, a much older man—in this case her uncle Pascal—whom she worships "like a god" and serves "like an idol" (*Travail*, OC VIII, 666). After her come La Nu-pieds and Josiane of *Travail*, a novel which provides a perfect example of this pseudo-socialistic, patriarchal and paternalistic society favoring an ever increasing birth-rate.

Yet, one woman eschews the general indoctrination and pacification of the female gender. Fernande of *Travail* is a rebel in every respect. Adulterous, sterile, born in the lower classes, exploiting men shamelessly, she reaches heights of evil not yet seen in Zola's fiction, both through the monstrous acuteness of the pleasures she savours, and through the damage she causes. In a very explicit scene, she mates with the devil himself in the person of a good-for-nothing worker, Ragu (OC VIII, 811, 783). Naturally, Fernande will have to die; she perishes with her husband in the fire of their house which he himself has ignited and where he forces her to remain. Only the purifying effect of fire could overcome this lewd monster who was menacing society. Her destruction by fire, which precedes the messianic chapters on the utopian prosperity of the new city of Beauclair, represents the last exorcism of demons before the advent of a new era.



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The creation of an 'ideal' woman of his own appears to be Zola's answer to the rise of such rebels as Fernande. This is the meaning, it seems to me, of the Pygmalion theme which is represented in Zola's fiction through the theory of "impregnation," and the character of the female orphan.

Significantly, most 'ideal' women of Zola's fiction are poor orphans. Indeed, for the experimental novelist, this is a perfect excuse to withdraw a character from its original milieu and have it undergo an evolution which only its heredity might moderate, according to the orthodoxy of his 'scientific' methodology. But there is also in this ploy a means to create a masterpiece of some sort, without being hindered by foreign elements, a way to build *ex nihilo* a creature who would reflect a perfectly idealized picture of its Maker. Miette (*La Fortune des Rougon*), Denise (*Au Bonheur des Dames*), Caroline (*L'Argent*), Henriette (*La Débâcle*) and Clotilde (*Le Docteur Pascal*) are all orphans, and thoroughly ideal, 'pacified' women, well integrated into patriarchal society. The sculptor Antoine Froment of *Paris* is the best Pygmalion type of Zola's works. A descendant of Prince Charming and a forerunner of the pastor in Gide's *Symphonie pastorale*, he not only raises an orphan to perfection, but he actually achieves a miracle of creating a living woman. In love with Lise, a young, apparently retarded, paralysed woman, he takes it upon himself to awaken her lifeless mind and body. The narrator comments upon his exploit in these terms:

He had taken the sleeping woman, deprived of movement and thought, and he had awakened her, had created her, had loved her in order to be loved by her. And she was his work; she was he (OC VII, 1530).

In this motif, the ideal woman becomes, of necessity, a non-being, the absence of the Other whose space the male ego has filled with his own imaginary projection. The double menace of the

Other and of Sex has thus been abolished through the disappearance of the woman and the glorification of the male ego.

What about the famed impartiality of Naturalism? Was it, in reality, but a subconscious guile designed, through its proclaimed tools of Science, Truth and Experimentation, and its avowed esthetics of mimetism, the more efficiently to cover the mythologizing nature of its discourse? Or else, was it a different kind of 'Naturalism' which merely reflected the fantasies, taboos, ideals, and even the very structure of the society which produced it, and which, for the most part, are still with us today? To be sure, these beliefs, fears and anxieties concerning women and femininity are not Zola's alone. They are those of his time and, to a lesser degree, of our own era. One is surprised, however, and perhaps even naively disappointed, that the 'liberal' Zola, the man of principles, the opponent of prejudice, the 'friend of women' even, should have been so deeply convinced of their malice, so fearful of their evil influence, so unable to divest himself of his preconceived ideas against them, that when creating his 'perfect,' utopian society he should have felt compelled to 'put them to death.' True, it is a metaphorical death, but an efficient one nonetheless. Thus with Zola, the undisputed leader of the Naturalists, women fare no better than with most other writers.

#### NOTES

1. In "La fille au théâtre" (*Une Campagne, Oeuvres Complètes*, Le Blond editor, Bernouard, 50 vols., Paris, vol. 46, pp 115-116) and fragments of an article in *Le Voltaire* where *Nana* was appearing as a serial, as cited by Henri Mitterand in his notes to the novel (RM II, 1686).
2. Among his novels, *La Conquête de Plassans*, *La Curée* and *Le Docteur Pascal*, as well as *Lourdes* and *Vérité* deal with the question of the evil influence exerted by the church on girls and women, which he also exposed and debated in short stories and newspaper articles. Furthermore, eleven novels (*Le Voeu d'une Morte*, *Madeleine Féral*, *La Curée*, *L'Assommoir*, *Pot-Bouille*, *La Joie de Vivre*, *L'oeuvre*, *Le Docteur Pascal*, *Paris*, *Travail* and *Vérité*) and numerous articles denounce the prevailing systems of education for girls and/or present his ideas on the subject. Camille Sée's law, passed in 1881, was to create "lycées" for girls and Normal Schools for young women in France.

3. In particular in *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *Fécondité* and in articles concerning them.
4. This is the way Zola is viewed by Anna Krakowski-Faygenbaum in her work *La Condition de la femme dans l'oeuvre de Emile Zola* (Paris: Nizet, 1974).
5. Zola calls it "la féture."
6. As a young man Emile Zola was very much influenced by Michélet, particularly by the historian's writings on, and fascination with, women and his concept of woman as "malade."
7. Zola was only sharing in a general belief of his time. The Goncourt Brothers' *Madame Gervaisais*, Alphonse Daudet's *L'Évangéliste* testify to the same conviction that religion is a sublimation of women's sexual appetite and extreme piety a typically feminine characteristic. As to the question of hysteria, Charcot and Freud bear witness to the fact that it was mostly considered a woman's disease.
8. Mario Praz's book on the *femme fatale* in nineteenth-century literature, *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) does not discuss any of Zola's novels.
9. Henri Mitterand notes in his article "L'idéologie du mythe dans *Germinal*" (*La Pensée*, April 1971, no. 156) a certain displacement of both exploited and exploiter in Zola's fiction and a tendency to attribute the ills of society to "natural" rather than historical causes.
10. Women are not the only incarnations of evil to be found in Zola's works. The "bad" workers (Lantier in *L'Assommoir*, Chaval in *Germinal*, Ragu in *Travail*) serve the same purpose, as do the "bad" priests (Archangias in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, Faujas in *La Conquête de Plassans* and Gorgias in *Vérité*).  
However, while the "bad" worker or the "bad" priest can symbolize the Other respectively for the bourgeois consciousness or the anticlerical intellectual, woman is a much more general stereotype of evil throughout Zola's fiction.
11. In his work, *Zola et les mythes ou De la nausée au Salut*, Paris, Seuil, 1971.
12. In *L'Assommoir* (RM II, 467), *Pot-Bouille* (RM III, 368-371), *La Joie de Vivre* (RM III, 1082) and *La Terre* (RM IV, 587).
13. The influence of positivist thinking on Zola is well known.
14. This theory, borrowed by Zola from Dr. Lucas, a contemporary scientist, claims that women will forever belong to the man with whom they first had sexual intercourse and that children born of other men will always resemble the first lover. This theme is mostly present in early works (*Madeleine Férat*, *Les Mystères de Marseille*); but it also appears in later novels (*L'Assommoir* and *Le Docteur Pascal*).

\*For a more detailed analysis of this whole question, see my book, *L'Eros et la femme chez Zola* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977).

The following abbreviations have been used:

OC - Emile Zola, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Cercle du Livre Précieux, 15 vols., Paris, 1966-1969.

RM - Emile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 5 vols., Paris, 1960-1967.

Volume and page references are from these editions, unless otherwise stated, and they appear in parentheses in the text. Translations are mine. For the convenience of the reader I am providing a chronological list of Emile Zola's novels:

#### The First Novels:

1865 *La Confession de Claude*; 1866 *Le Voeu d'une morte*; 1867 *Les Mystères de Marseille* and *Thérèse Raquin*; 1868 *Madeleine Férat*.

#### Les Rougon-Macquart (Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire)

1871 *La Fortune des Rougon*; 1872 *La Curée*; 1873 *Le Ventre de Paris*; 1874 *La Conquête de Plassans*; 1875 *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*; 1876 *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*; 1877 *L'assommoir*; 1878 *Une Page d'amour*; 1880 *Nana*; 1882 *Pot-Bouille*; 1883 *Au Bonheur des Dames*; 1884 *La Joie de vivre*; 1885 *Germinal*; 1886 *L'Oeuvre*; 1887 *La Terre*; 1888 *Le Rêve*; 1890 *La Bête humaine*; 1891 *L'Argent*; 1892 *La Débâcle*; 1893 *Le Docteur Pascal*.

#### The Last Novels

*Les Trois Villes*: 1894 *Lourdes*; 1896 *Rome*; 1898 *Paris*. *Les Quatres Évangiles*: 1899 *Fécondité*; 1901 *Travail*; 1903 *Vérité*. Zola died in 1902, not having written the projected, last "gospel," "Justice."