

L'AURORE

Littéraire, Artistique, Sociale

J'Accuse...!

LETTRE AU PRÉSIDENT DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE

Par ÉMILE ZOLA

Émile Zola

BY JESSICA TEISCH

If you ask me what I came to do in this world, I, an artist, I will answer you: 'I am here to live out loud.'

—Émile Zola

In 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was put on trial for passing military secrets to the Germans. Despite improper court procedures and scant evidence of his guilt, he was convicted of espionage and sentenced to life in prison on Devil's Island. The Dreyfus affair scandalized France and divided the country between the Catholic Church, the royalists, and the army and the more liberal, republican society.

Émile Zola—one of the most widely read French novelists of his day and a founder of the literary school of naturalism—risked his reputation to defend the principles of truth and justice. On January 13, 1898, he penned an open letter to President Félix Faure titled "J'accuse" ("I accuse"). Published on the front page of the daily paper *L'Aurore*, the letter accused the French gov-

ernment of anti-Semitism and of a cover-up in the Dreyfus case. Zola pointed fingers at the real traitor, who had been acquitted, and named officers involved in the scandal. Accused of libel, Zola fled to England. "Truth is on the march, and nothing can stop it," he wrote.

When he returned to Paris a year later, Zola (1840—1902) had become something of a hero. "Zola's part in the Dreyfus case has compelled the admiration of the disinterested public," noted *The Dial* (3/16/1898). It also renewed interest in Zola's scandalous portraits of French life—literature quite in keeping, in fact, with his public call for justice. In more than two dozen novels, plays, and essays that scrutinized different aspects of French life, Zola confronted the Second Empire's ills head on—alcoholism, sexual exploitation, disillusioned

Where to Start

No better depiction of the working poor (and drunken passion) exists than **L'ASSOMMOIR**, shocking in its day. **NANA**, about sexual manipulation and exploitation, continues where **L'ASSOMMOIR** leaves off. **GERMINAL**, considered Zola's masterpiece, offers a brutal—and relevant—look at the proletariat. Finally, "**J'ACCUSE**," Zola's condemnation of anti-Semitism and plea for justice, is one of the finest pieces of journalism ever written.

priests, rampant commercialism, and detestable working-class conditions. *L'assommoir* (*The Dram Shop*, 1877), part of the epic 20-novel cycle *Les Rougon-Macquart* (*The Rougon-Macquart Cycle*), shocked readers with its depiction of Parisian lower-class life; the risqué *Nana* (1880) sensationalized prostitution; and *Germinal* (1885) tragically portrayed a miners' strike in northern France. With great fanfare and only slightly less controversy, Zola denounced French society's hypocrisy. By the time Dreyfus had been pardoned, Zola had become less an "apostle of the gutter" than a champion of truth and justice. Today, readers around the world revere the author as one of the finest chroniclers of 19th-century France.

BORN IN PARIS to an Italian engineer and a French woman, Zola spent his childhood in Aix-en-Provence in southeast France. In his semiautobiographical novel *La confession de Claude* (*Claude's Confession*, 1865), he described himself as "a strange creature" that constantly "looked for affection." At the Collège Bourbon, he befriended artist Paul Cézanne, a friendship that later involved him in Paris's cutting-edge art world. In 1858, 11 years after his father's death, extreme poverty forced Zola and his mother to move to Paris, where he studied at the Lycée Saint-Louis. After failing his baccalaureate, Zola embarked on a series of odd jobs. In 1862, he started working at the publishing house of Louis Christophe François Hachette and writing articles. His political pieces barely hid his disdain for French Emperor Napoléon III, who had unjustly grasped power. His muckraking articles condemned the poverty of the French, and his art reviews lauded the growing Impressionist movement. Zola barely eked out an existence; the racy *La confession de Claude*, which led to his resignation from Hachette, narrates how one cold day the protagonist pawned both his coat and trousers.

One of Zola's biographers noted the "gulf between Zola in his early twenties, in a very real sense the poet starving in the garret, and Zola only a few years later, the bustling, prosperous pressman" (F. W. J. Hemmings, *Emile Zola*, 1953). Indeed, Zola's fortune changed in 1867 with publication of his first major novel, *Thérèse Raquin*. In 1870 he married Gabrielle-Alexandrine Meley; a later affair produced two children. He also started *Les Rougon-Macquart*, for which he interviewed experts, read reports, and visited sites to obtain the most realistic picture he could of his subjects' lives and conditions. *L'assommoir* made him famous throughout France; the popular *Nana* and *Germinal* followed. Some of his novels, including *La débâcle* (1892), which openly censured the French government during the Franco-German War of 1870–1871, drew sharp criticism. While he wrote *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola remained active in Paris's art and literary scene. By the end of the 1870s, his villa in Médan, near Paris (he was now a rich man), hosted a small group of writers.

Critics generally consider Zola's final series of novels, *Les quatre Évangiles* (*The Four Gospels*, 1899–1903), less successful than *Les Rougon-Macquart*. On September 29, 1902—before he could complete the series—Zola died

from accidental asphyxiation in his home. At his funeral, Anatole France described him as "a moment in the conscience of Man." In 1908, his remains were transferred to the Panthéon.

Zola's naturalism: *Les Rougon-Macquart* (The Rougon-Macquart Cycle)

SUBTITLED "THE SOCIAL AND NATURAL HISTORY of a family under the Second Empire," *Les Rougon-Macquart* is Zola's greatest literary achievement. Much like Balzac in his *La comédie humaine*, which depicted France of the Restoration and July Monarchy (1814–1848), Zola portrayed France under the Second Empire (1852–1870) in 20 interconnected novels.

In 1848, a series of revolutions waged by different interests of the working and middle classes led to the overthrow of King Louis-Philippe and the formation of the Second Republic. In 1851, Louis Bonaparte (Napoléon I's nephew) declared the Second Empire and proclaimed himself Emperor Napoléon III. Under him, France entered a modern era. Despite its reputation for graft and greed, this period saw the rebuilding of Paris under Baron Haussmann; the rise of the middle class; increased industrial production; impressive economic growth; involvement in the Crimean War; and the disastrous Franco-Prussian War.

Zola, in his fictionalization of the era, was primarily concerned with the social and environmental influences that he believed dictated people's fates. Influenced by Alfred de Musset, George Sand, Victor Hugo, and Charles Darwin, whose theory of natural selection he applied to Parisian life by focusing on the role of heredity on the individual, Zola developed his naturalistic style in the late 1860s. He became a central figure in the literary naturalism movement, a continuation of 19th-century realism, which sought to recreate the everyday conditions of people's lives. Naturalism went one step further in its scientific approach to the study of people and their environment, a method Zola described in *Le roman expérimental* (*The Experimental Novel*, 1880). Genetics and environment, Zola claimed, played larger roles in determining human behavior than agency and free will. He believed that if he could show the scientific laws that determined human fortunes, others in society could help eradicate social ills.

Theories of naturalism underlie *Les Rougon-Macquart*, about two branches of a family stemming from a common ancestress. Each tangled line—one legitimate, one illegitimate—allowed Zola to paint a complex portrait of "a family that cannot restrain itself in its rush to possess all the good things that progress is making available and is derailed by its own momentum, the fatal convulsions that accompany the birth of a new world." The Rougons, petty bourgeoisie, embody the rising middle class; the Macquarts, disreputable outcasts, experience the negative consequences of the Second Empire's economic growth. Zola cast each individual's rise to the imperial court or fall into poverty

Zola and the “Modern” Parisian Art World

In 1886 Zola published *L'oeuvre* (*The Masterpiece*), the fourteenth novel in *Les Rougon-Macquart*. In it Claude Lantier, a talented young artist in the 1860s and 1870s, becomes frustrated after his paintings are rejected by the Paris Salon. To gain acceptance, he devotes himself tirelessly to his masterpiece but is unable to complete it because of mental illness. The reticent, struggling Paul Cézanne ended his lifelong friendship with Zola over what he believed was an unflattering depiction of him as Lantier. (Today, Lantier is generally acknowledged to be a composite of Cézanne and Édouard Manet.)

While brilliantly documenting the lives of bohemian artists in 19th-century Paris, *L'oeuvre* also provides insight into Zola's involvement in the controversial art world. As a youth, Zola championed Cézanne's artistic abilities and encouraged his move to Paris. When the Salon jury rejected Cézanne's works, Zola wrote a series of articles in *L'Événement* (later published as *Mon Salon* in 1866) indirectly defending Cézanne and Manet, whose work had also been rejected, and demanding the reestablishment of the Salon des Refusés (an art exhibition originally held in 1863 for works rejected by the Paris Salon). Zola, even though he knew little about painting, integrated himself as critic into the new artistic movement and established a fight against censorship. “I have defended M. Manet, as I will always in my life defend every honest form of individuality under attack,” Zola wrote. “I shall always be on the side of the defeated.” He said less about Cézanne, except to stress that he was an artist in the making.

In 1868, after the Salon jury accepted paintings by Manet, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Camille



Zola portrait by Édouard Manet

Pissarro, Zola believed that he had achieved his small revolution. But, despite comparisons between literary naturalism and Impressionism, in the 1870s Zola started to feel that while Impressionist painters could depict the picturesque aspects of Paris, they could not adequately capture the city's social ills. Zola, who perhaps felt that their observations lagged behind his own, turned to other causes, such as the fate of the proletariat (as seen in *Germinal*). Many scholars believe that Zola wrote his art criticism primarily to attract attention to his friends, and when they no longer needed it, he ceased to do so. ■

against his or her environment—from the idyllic or harsh countryside to the bustling city of Paris.

French readers, though shocked by Zola's rather disreputable characters, nonetheless made him successful; elsewhere, *Les Rougon-Macquart* only slowly appeared in translation. When *Nana* reached the United States, Henry James called it “a great deal of filth”—though he later praised Zola's love for truth. Among social reformers, Zola became an important critic of bourgeois society, and his work influenced American writers, including Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and Frank Norris. Some critics accused Zola of exaggerating his scientific ideals (Zola himself claimed to have rethought his methods as he completed the cycle); nonetheless, they praised his novels as well-crafted works of art. Today, *Les Rougon-Macquart* is considered “a huge imaginative achievement, encompassing a whole society. ... Few other writers have had such a powerful sense of the impersonal forces beneath the surface of human lives” (*Guardian Unlimited*, 9/28/02).

MAJOR WORKS

Thérèse Raquin (1867)



Thérèse Raquin, Zola's first major work, brought its 27-year-old author fame, money, and some notoriety. Like his works to come, *Thérèse Raquin* took a scientific approach to the study of human nature and moved its author away from romanticism. “My aim has been to study temperaments and not characters,” Zola wrote in a preface to the 1868 edition. Thérèse's and Laurent's situation results not from their guilty consciences but from the “inescapable promptings of their flesh.”

THE STORY: In Paris, Thérèse Raquin, trapped in a loveless marriage to her cousin, Camille, starts an affair with Laurent, her husband's artist friend. Their passion leads them to commit a crime only Laurent's mother suspects. Watched by her judgmental eye and overwhelmed by their misdeed, Thérèse and Laurent fail to find peace—and commit another horrifying act.

"The novel portrays the logical, inevitable collision between a 'nature sanguine' (Laurent) and a 'nature nerveuse' (Thérèse), each the product of a given environment and education. ... In Thérèse Raquin Zola brought together the scientific ambition and the scandalous realities of contemporary culture." JENNIFER BIRKETT AND JAMES KEARNS, *A GUIDE TO FRENCH LITERATURE*, 1997

"With its overtones of early feminism and pre-Freudian psychology, its compelling passion and moral ambiguity (the reader hovers between sympathizing with Thérèse and condemning her), the book still exerts a powerful hold. ... Zola was striving for something akin to the goals of the contemporary painters whose work he espoused: new ways and quasi-scientific methods of depicting the world." ANNE MIDGETTE, *NEW YORK TIMES*, 10/21/01

THE BOTTOM LINE: An erotic portrayal of adultery and murder.

THE MOVIE: 1981, starring Kate Nelligan and Kenneth Cranham and directed by Simon Langton; 2006, starring Gerard Butler, Giovanni Ribisi, and Ludivine Sagnier and directed by Charlie Stratton.

Selected Works of Les Rougon-Macquart (1871–1893)

L'assommoir (The Dram Shop) (1877)



The seventh novel in the cycle outraged many conservative critics with its coarse language, realistic (rather than moralistic) depiction of the working poor, and portrayal of alcoholism. Perhaps because of its shock value, it sold well.

THE STORY: The teenage Gervaise, conceived in a drunken passion and raised by her no-good father, Antoine Maquart, runs off to Paris with her two children. After her lover deserts her, Gervaise meets Coupeau, a sober working-class man, marries him, and starts a successful laundry business. But when Coupeau turns to alcohol, he brings Gervaise down with him.

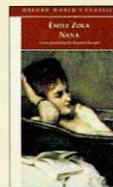
"Of Emile Zola's *L'assommoir* the less said the better. ... Its impure pictures may be life-like, but so would be the reproduction of a cancerous sore, or of a scrofulous ulcer."

HARPER'S MAGAZINE, 7/1879

"[Gervaise's] career, as presented, has fairly the largeness that, throughout the chronicle, we feel as epic, and the intensity of her creator's vision of it, and of the dense sordid life hanging about it, is to my sense one of the great things the modern novel has been able to do." HENRY JAMES, *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*, 8/1903

THE BOTTOM LINE: Considered the most brutal of this epic cycle for its desperate depictions of poverty, hardship, and working-class life.

Nana (1880)



Nana, Zola's sensational, commercially successful ninth installment, is a study of prostitution that criticizes the follies and double standards of France. It opens in 1867, the year of Paris's World Fair. Like *L'assommoir*, *Nana* shocked readers with its depiction of sexual exploitation.

Nana herself illustrates the power of heredity and environment to crush someone's spirit—and represents the downfall of the Second Empire.

THE STORY: *Nana* Coupeau, Gervaise Maquart's beautiful daughter from *L'assommoir*, turns to street prostitution at age 15 to escape her abusive and poverty-stricken life. Discovered on the streets, she rises among the Parisian elite and becomes the most dazzling courtesan of the day and "a devourer of men." Despite her elite status and wealth, she lapses into spiritual and physical disintegration.

"*Nana*, in fine, is not worth reading, but everyone who has been irritated by the extent to which the theory of 'le naturalisme' has been carried out will rejoice that it was written. It is a blow from which the cult of M. Zola will hardly recover." *THE NATION*, 4/22/1880

"The triumph of the novel, surely, is that *Nana*, while being an absolutely amoral, greedy, foul-mouthed young woman, remains entirely sympathetic throughout. ... Zola's eyes are those of a sociologist." A. N. WILSON, *DAILY TELEGRAPH* [LONDON], 2/4/2002

THE BOTTOM LINE: About the boudoirs of the Second Empire, and a bleak—but salacious—portrait of late 19th-century France.

THE MOVIES: Among many: the 1926 silent film starring Catherine Hessling and directed by Jean Renoir.

Au bonheur des dames (The Ladies' Paradise) (1883)



The eleventh novel in the series prophesies the rapacious consumerism that engulfed late 19th-century Paris. It also explores the role of fashion, women, and commodities in modern society and shows the effect of Paris's corrupt moral values—particularly sexual exploitation—on the individual.

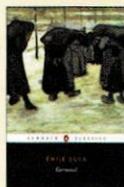
THE STORY: Octave Mouret owns a giant department store—the "cathedral of modern commerce," based in part on Bon Marché—that overshadows the old-fashioned boutiques nearby. The innocent Denise Baudu, torn between working for her uncle's small clothing store and the enticing department store, becomes a salesgirl at the latter. But when seducer Octave falls in love with her, she refuses to be commodified.

"... a story which ends with the ringing of wedding-bells off-stage, has the innocent air of a prim mid-Victorian novel. ... *Au bonheur des dames* was a transition novel." F. W. J. HEMMINGS,

EMILE ZOLA, 1953

THE BOTTOM LINE: A dissection of the modern capitalist city and its changing gender roles.

Germinal (1885)



Germinal, the thirteenth installment, is one of Zola's masterpieces. To write this political novel about a coal miners' strike in the 1860s, Zola visited northern France's mines. Many saw the novel, with its grim depiction of labor conditions and class conflict, as a call to revolution.

Genetic theories naturally play a role: Étienne inherits the Macquarts' impulsive, addictive behavior.

THE STORY: When idealistic drifter Étienne Lantier (son of the deceased Gervaise Macquart from *L'assomoir*) finds work in northern France's coal mines, he vows to improve the lives of the hungry, wretched miners. As conditions in the mining community deteriorate further, Étienne naively leads a strike against the rapacious management. His involvement could mean salvation—or certain death for himself and the woman he loves.

"[Germinal] is perfect ... in representing the philosophy which Zola avowed: man as the pawn of mechanical forces (here, economic), the thing, primarily of his age and his social environment. Individual actions, individual destinies, hold their place only in a larger, more universal scheme of actions and reactions." MATTHEW JOSEPHSON, *ZOLA AND HIS TIME*, 1928

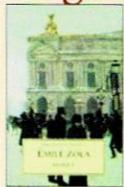
"Germinal ... has earned canonical status both as an exemplar of the naturalist novel and as one of the great artistic treatments of industrial conflict. ... Zola's decision to write about a firm like Montsou placed *Germinal* squarely in the midst of contemporary debates about industrial management." DONALD REID, "METAPHOR AND MANAGEMENT," *FRENCH HISTORICAL STUDIES*, FALL 1992

"A long, blazing look into the abyss, one of the most moving and horrifying portrayals of social unrest in all world literature." MICHAEL WILMINGTON, *CHICAGO TRIBUNE*, 7/5/02

THE BOTTOM LINE: A brutal working-class novel, a shocking exposé on the inhumane conditions of mine workers, and one of Zola's (still) best-selling classics.

THE MOVIE: 1993, starring Gérard Depardieu and Miou-Miou and directed by Claude Berri.

L'argent (Money) (1891)



The eighteenth installment satirizes the Crédit Mobilier scandal of 1872, which tainted those involved with the construction of America's Union Pacific Railroad. Critics consider this novel one of the most accessible of *Les Rougon-Macquart* for its pathos, humor, and explication

of rampant capitalism. It also deals with France's rampant anti-Semitism.

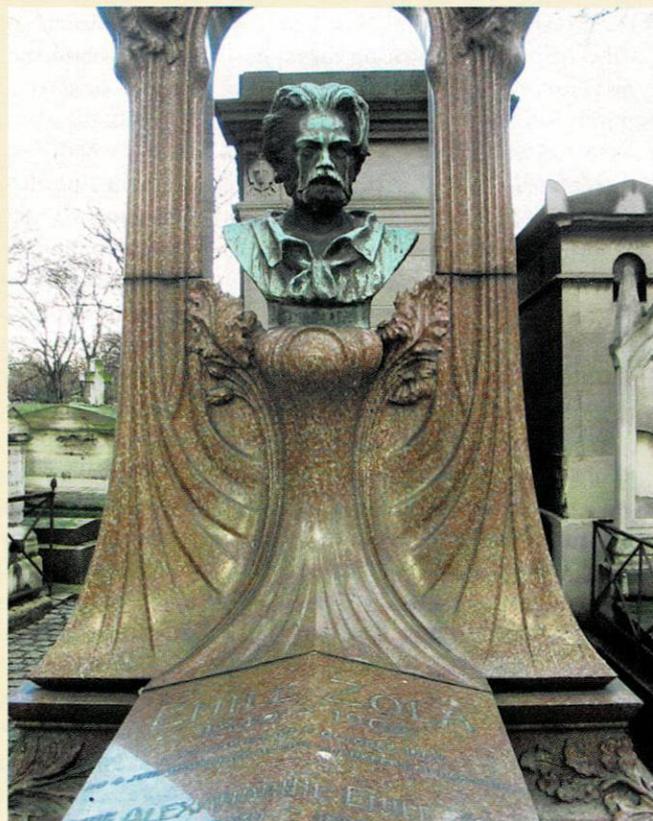
THE STORY: Aristide Rougon (Saccard), a greedy speculator in Paris, concocts the perfect money-making scheme. He founds a banking corporation and enthrones himself "in a sumptuous office with Louis XIV furniture, gilded and covered in Genoa velvet." Although the company purportedly develops French interests in the Near East, it instead manipulates its own stock price. As Saccard butts heads with his rival, a Jewish financier, he soon discovers that a fall in fortune usually accompanies its rise.

"It is a masterly work, unnecessarily revolting at times in some of its details, but nevertheless a book in which a difficult subject is handled with the utmost skill." HARPER'S MAGAZINE, 3/1888

"To what extent Zola believed in such Jewish stereotypes is difficult to fathom within a polemical style aimed at two types of readers: those who are on one's side, and those who need to be turned around and convinced. ... By enticing the unsuspecting antisemitic reader with such stereotypes, Zola was better able to convert him or her to the novel's final argument." MAX LIKIN, *JEWISH SOCIAL STUDIES*, FALL 2001

THE BOTTOM LINE: Think Enron or WorldCom.

THE MOVIE: 1928, starring Pierre Alcover, Alfred Abel, and Brigitte Helm and directed by Marcel L'Herbier. ■



Gravestone of Émile Zola at cimetière Montmartre; his remains are now interred in the Panthéon.