

## **Germinal (1885)**

### **1. Systems**

The miner must be shown crushed, starving, a victim of ignorance...but not persecuted, for the bosses are not deliberately vindictive....The worker is the victim of the facts of existence – capital, competition, industrial crises...(Zola)

In that preface, Zola undertook to show how “the slow succession of accidents of nerve and blood declare themselves in a race as the result of a primary organic lesion, and determine according to his surroundings in each of the individuals that compose it, the feelings, desires, passions [...] to whose products we give the conventional names, virtues and vices” [...] And yet, in spite of himself, Zola is not a naturalist, but rather the greatest of living French idealists, and since Victor’s Hugo’s death, first of her prose poets. (B.W.Wells, ‘Zola and Literary Naturalism’)

While Etienne lingered by the fire warming his poor raw hands, Le Voureux began to emerge as from a dream. He could now pick out each part of the works: the tarpaulin-covered screening shed, the headgear, the huge winding-house [...] the pit was evil-looking, a voracious beast crouching ready to devour the world. (*Germinal*, 1.1)

For one journey he followed her and watched; she ran along with her behind so high and her hands so low that she seemed to be trotting on all fours [...] normal course of human suffering. (*Germinal* 1.4)

He felt strangely troubled as he contemplated this child who, with his pointed muzzle, green eyes, long ears, resembled some degenerate with instinctive intelligence and craftiness of a savage, gradually reverting to man’s animal origins. The pit had made him what he was. (*Germinal*, 4.6)

‘Ah, here it comes!’ exclaimed Monsieur Hennebeau [...] Do you think that the Company hasn’t as much to lose in the present crisis as you have? It cannot fix wages as it likes, it must be competitive or go under. Why don’t you blame the facts instead of the Company? [...] I am not rejecting anything. I am just a paid servant like you and I have no more say in all this than the youngest of your pit-boys. I am given my orders, and my job is to see them properly carried out. (*Germinal* 4.2)

‘Is there any swine here who can’t understand that? I’m only a working man like yourselves. I’ve been told to look after this and I’m looking after it!’  
Daddy Quandieu’s intellect stopped at that point, in stiff military discipline, his head was narrow and his eyes had been dimmed by half a century of black gloom underground. (*Germinal* 5.3)

## 2. Life Cycle

'Here we go!' said Catherine; 'Levaque goes down, so up comes Bouteloup to join la Levaque.' [...] A collier taking in a ripper as a lodger; that gave his wife two men, one for nights and one for days. (*Germinal* 1.1)

Everybody in the pit had had a go: a real free-for-all among pals and nobody minded. But one day, when somebody had accused her of going with a nailmaker ...but a miner (*Germinal*, 1.3)

The sight of this poor woman's pleading eyes terrified her, and she fled. It was said that she gave up her place in her husband's bed to haulage girls among the customers. It was a known fact that when a miner wanted more credit, all he had to do was to send along his daughter or wife. (*Germinal* 2. 2)

They knew everything but could not do much, they were too young; but they spent hours feeling round, playing about, like vicious little puppies. He called it 'playing mothers and fathers'. (*Germinal* 2.5)

Unknown to him she had taken a lover. Finally he left the Pas-de-Calais for a secretarial position in Paris [...] Paris, that she had been dreaming about ever since she had her first doll – for it took her just one week to shake off every trace of provincialism and become elegant, throwing herself into all the expensive crazes of the moment. (*Germinal* 4.1)

These were his normal encounters now; girls on their backs in every ditch [...] How gladly he would have starved like them if he could have begun his life again with a woman who would give herself to him here on the ground with all her body and all her heart. (*Germinal* 4.6)

It was Bataille [...] On and on he galloped [...] Where was he bound? Over yonder, maybe, towards that dream of his youth, that mill on the Scarpe where he was born, that distant memory of the sun burning up like a big lamp. (*Germinal* 7.4)

Feeling her half naked body through her rags, so close to his, his virility returned, and he took her [...] They loved each other in despair, in death itself. (*Germinal* 7.5)

Deep down underfoot the picks were still obstinately hammering away. All his comrades were there, he could hear them following his every step [...] Men were springing up, a black avenging host was slowly germinating in the furrows, thrusting upwards for the harvests of future ages. And very soon their germination would crack the earth asunder. (*Germinal* 7.6)

Fertility and death characterize the earth and are interdependent in *Les Rougon-Macquart* [...] this "life-death-life cycle – possibly Zola's most persistent leitmotiv – can be seen as a typical instance of the basic process of the mythical thought" [...] The key distinction between the human mother and earth is eternal life, for while the human

female reproducer eventually dies, the earth does not. (Susan Henessy, 'Zola's Male Creation', 1999)

### 3. Worlds

But some very lean years followed, until the Revolution had run its violent course and Napoleon had crashed in blood [...] the Gregoires had an unshakeable faith in their mine. It would go up again; why! God himself was not more reliable. And this religious faith was mingled with a profound gratitude for an investment which had kept the family I idleness for a century. (*Germinal* 2. i.)

'It was inevitable,' said Deneulin, 'that too much prosperity during the recent years should land us into this. Think of the enormous amount of capital immobilized in railways [...] 'There has been a famine in India', Deneulin went on in a low voice, as though speaking to himself. 'The Americans have stopped ordering iron and cast-iron... and a distant shock is enough to shake the whole world'. (*Germinal* 4.1.)

Novelists must assume certain preconceptions in their readers' minds in creating a fictional universe. By making the imaginary world conform to these preconceptions, the author effects the "intensity of illusion" that James saw as necessary to the success of any novel. When the reader recognizes as accurate one aspect of an author's vision – psychological, social, physical, moral, etc. – he is led to accept the validity of the vision as a whole [...] The modern reader, involved in the same historical movements shaping the world of Zola's cycle, feels kinship with its characters and suspends his disbelief in them and their universe. The particular aspect of political reality exploited by *Germinal* is the proletariat's struggle for dignity. (D. Sandy Petry, 'The Revolutionary Setting of *Germinal*')

### 4. Ruptures

'We are very hard up,' stammered Maheude; 'if only we had a five-franc piece....' The words stuck in her throat, for the Maheus were very proud and did not beg [...] 'No, it is not our custom. It can't be done.' Cecile was touched by the mother's tragic face and wished to do all she could for the children. They were still staring at the brioche. She cut two pieces and gave them one each. (*Germinal* 2.2)

'Balderdash!' said Souvarine again. 'Your friend Karl Marx is still at the stage of wanting to leave things to natural evolution. No politics, no conspiracies, isn't that the idea? ... Raise fires in the four corners of cities, mow people down, wipe everything out, and when nothing whatever is left of this rotten world perhaps a better one will spring up (*Germinal* 3. 1)

'By fire, poison, and the dagger. The real hero is the murderer, for he is the avenger of the people, the revolutionary in action. (*Germinal* 4.4)

'God Almighty! What a massacre! It's come to this now, that workers have to fight their fellow workers.' [...] Maheu had not said a word since the auction, but now, as though waking out of a dream, he repeated:

'The masters .... It's bloody well time, too!' (*Germinal* 3.1)

'That's got 'em!' he hissed, quickly to Etienne. 'They're ready now [...] And thus it came about that the ten thousand miners of Montsou became members of the International. (*Germinal* 4.4)

In him there was a mixture of Rasseneur's practical demands and Souverine's violent destructiveness [...] he would walk in a dream and see visions of the people of the world wholly transformed without so much as one window broken or one drop of blood spilt. (*Germinal* 3.3)

Reason tottered before this mental effort and left only the obsession of the fanatic. Gone were the scruples of his human feeling and common sense, and nothing seemed simpler than the realization of this brave new world. (*Germinal* 4.7)

Mouquette was already undoing his trousers and pulling them down, helped by la Levaque who lifted the legs. And Ma Brule, with her withered hands, parted his naked thighs and grasped his dead virility [...] The soft skin resisted and she had to try again, but she managed in the end to pull away the lump of hairy, bleeding flesh which she waved aloft with a snarl of triumph. (*Germinal* 5.6)

Jeanlin leaped on to the soldier's shoulders with one bound, like a wild cat, clung on with his nails and plunged his open knife into his throat [...] 'In God's name, what did you do that for?' 'I don't know, I just had to'. (*Germinal* 6.4)

There was a moment of stupefaction. They had really fired, and the crowd stood motionless, unable to believe it [...] Then the volley swept the whole area, moving down the groups of onlookers as they were enjoying the battle and laughing a hundred paces away. (*Germinal* 6.5)

'On her last day I was there, in the public square [...] Even after death her eyes were still upon me. I waved my hat and walked away.' (*Germinal* 7.2)

At that moment Souvarine rose to his feet on the shaken slag-heap [...] He was bound for the unknown, over yonder, calmly going to deal violent destruction wherever dynamite could be found to blow up cities and men. (*Germinal* 7.3)

Their daughter was lying on the floor, blue in the face, strangled. Round her throat were the red marks of a giant's grip. Bonnemort, tottering on his useless legs, had fallen beside her and could not move. (*Germinal* 7.4)

Souvarine's 'anarchism' too must be viewed with similar caution. Undeniably Zola conceived his character in some sense as a representative of that social theory. The character stands at one extreme in the ideological spectrum of social dissent which Etienne Lantier, the central figure of the work, indeterminately traverses and of which Rasseneur, the moderate reformer, provides the opposite pole [...] If it suited the

novelist's social and historical purposes to have in his novel a spokesperson for anarchy, it was essential for the role that his character would assume that his anarchist views should verge on intransigent nihilism. (David Baguley, 'The Function of Zola's *Souvarine*')

#### Selected Reading

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