



Émile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*: A study of the novel from a psychoanalytical perspective

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Abstract

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*Émile Zola was a French novelist, affiliated with the literary movement of Naturalism, who was interested in an objective and scientific study of reality, an approach to literature which was at first very much debated and criticised. The investigation of literary works from a psychoanalytical perspective is commonly conceived as the examination of the hidden meanings of a text in relation to the author, to the personality of the characters of a novel, poetry or play and to the cognitive and emotional effects of the literary composition on the reader. The purpose of this paper is the investigation of the two main characters of Zola's novel *Thérèse Raquin*, Thérèse and Laurent, from a psychoanalytical point of view in relation to their single personalities, the dynamics of their relationship and to the problem of guilt associated with the criminal act.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Émile Zola was a French writer and journalist, author of several novels and essays which concerned the societal and cultural problems of nineteenth century France. He was also connected to the literary movement of Naturalism [1] which is considered as an extreme form of realism dealing with a scientific approach to literature differently from the previous currents. Indeed, Zola's third novel, *Thérèse Raquin* published in 1867, depicts the tormented life of a young woman living in Paris who is of north African origins. Much emphasis is set around the character's emotions, family context, romantic relationship, criminal misdeeds, cruel and dishonest behaviour, feelings of remorse and guilt which are all analysed from a psychoanalytical perspective. The brutality and inhumanity of the key event of the novel, the murder of Thérèse's husband Camille by the hand of Laurent, is somehow in

antithesis with Zola's naturalistic explanation of human events. Some critics [2] share the idea that the novel has a macabre and inexplicable connotation which resembles it more to a gothic novel since the major themes of the novel are death, murder, sexual perversion, extramarital affair, mental illness and immorality. Anyway, these considerations on the novel's genre will be very useful for the main purpose of this paper which is the investigation of the main characters, Thérèse and Laurent, from a psychoanalytical point of view in relation to their single personalities and to the problem of guilt. The importance of a psychoanalytical approach to the analysis of literary works is widely described in many literary theory and criticism guides [3, 4 & 5]. The investigation of literary works from a psychoanalytical perspective is commonly conceived as the examination of the hidden meanings of a text in relation to the author or writer as in psychobiography, to the personality of the

characters of a novel, poetry or play and to the cognitive and emotional effects of the literary composition on the reader.

Indeed, psychoanalytic theories can be very helpful to the analysis of literary works for several reasons as Barry outlines in his theoretical approach to literature. Firstly, it is possible to make connections between the hidden content of a novel or poem and the unconscious mind as well as between the explicit content of a text and the conscious. Secondly, the repression of emotions and the disclosure of unconscious elements can be related either to the characters of a novel, poem and play or to the author himself. Thirdly, theories of sexuality can be associated to the representations of emotional suffering and mental dysfunctions in the form of psychological complaints or even madness. Fourthly, the Oedipus complex plays a relevant role in influencing gender dynamics and the relationships between men and women in social contexts as it clearly appears, for example, in the Shakespearean play Hamlet. Lastly, the belief that the analysis of psychological elements is more important for the critical reading of literary works than any other social or historical approach. In this paper, much emphasis is set around the instinctual drives and defence mechanisms as described by Freud, Jung's theories on extroversion and introversion and the problem of guilt related to the murder of Camille of which both Laurent and Thérèse are responsible although in different ways.

II. Methodology

The investigation of this research paper consists in a qualitative close analysis of selected passages of the novel with a particular focus on the descriptions of events and mental states, significant utterances, language choice and figures of speech which best depict the personalities and the behaviour of the characters of Thérèse and Laurent. The analysis is performed from a psychoanalytical perspective since it is concerned with the understanding of the unconscious parts of the human mind, of hidden meanings and psychological conflicts as well as relational and

emotional aspects. This approach to a literary text is called *textanalysis* by a French academic who argues that analysing the psyche of a patient in an analytical setting is not different from analysing a text [6]. Therefore, the two disciplines, literature and psychoanalysis, can support each other in an ultimate interpretation of the text that should be sensible, thoughtful and discernible. In addition, the author of this paper is a psychiatrist who is trained in psychoanalytic psychotherapy and has a consolidated experience in the study of literary works from a psychological and clinical perspective. In the following section of this paper, the personalities of the two characters, Thérèse and Laurent, will be discussed separately.

III. DISCUSSION

The personality of Thérèse

At the beginning of his novel, Zola depicts Thérèse as a shy, calm and quiet person who respected her aunt's authority as described in the following excerpt: "... elle prit l'habitude de parler à voix basse, de marcher sans faire du bruit, de rester muette et immobiles sur une chaise" ([20] p. 40). At the same time, Zola emphasizes the North African origins of this female character in contrast to what described before as shown in this passage: "... on sentait en elle de souplesse félines, ... toute une énergie, toute une passion qui dormaient dans sa chair assoupie" ([20] p. 40). It is interesting at this point to discern the reason of this discrepancy and to further investigate into the nature of Thérèse. The character's behaviour and attitudes can be explained, according to the theories of psychoanalysis, as the consequence of a defence mechanism called repression. Repression, a concept first theorised by Freud [7], is the mechanism for which mental contents and traumatic experiences are pushed back into the unconscious so that the individual is not aware of his feelings, behaviour or thoughts. The essence of this manoeuvre lies simply in rejecting and keeping something out of the consciousness, buried alive and then repressed. In the case of Thérèse, there are no clear references to possible situations or events that could have favoured the use of this mechanism

such as previous traumas in life, but it is clearly stated that her nature was different from her external appearance: “Elle garda ses allures souples, sa physionomie calme et indifférente, ... mais elle vécut intérieurement une existence brûlante et emportée” ([20] p. 41). The feline and savage nature of this character is linked to her African origins and better conceived in terms of biology and innate culture since she was half European and half Algerian [8]. It is likely that Zola’s intent was to highlight the cultural disparities between two different cultures and mentalities: the people from the French colonies being cruel, ruthless and rebellious compared to the calm, cultured and restrained disposition of the French population. These considerations clearly put the accent on the relationship between biology and temperament, true nature and social behaviour which, in the case of Thérèse, seems to be in a sufficient equilibrium at least in the first part of the novel as shown in the following passage: “Elle possédait un sang-froid suprême, une apparente tranquillité qui cachait des emportements terribles” ([20] p. 41). This hidden impetus recalls the problem of instinctual life as conceived by Freud [9] who affirmed that human instincts generate from inside the body, thus having a biological substrate. They are pushed outwards and discharged because of a force called pressure, they are aimed towards their satisfaction for which an object (i.e., a physical person) is necessary. This theory explains very well the nature of Thérèse whose instinctual side is initially repressed or oppressed [10] because of the action of the Super-Ego which in this case is represented by Mme Raquin as well as social pressures (French culture). But, in a second time, her instincts are completely manifested when properly stimulated by her new lover and partner in crime, Laurent. Because of the psychic energy that seeks for its discharge [11], Thérèse’s true nature can be freed to the point that even her physical appearance undergoes a remarkable change. Zola himself emphasises this aspect when describing the first encounter of the two lovers: “Cette face diamante s’était comme trasfiguré, ... les lèvres humides, les yeux luisants, elle rayonnait ... d’une beauté étrange” ([20] p. 72). Although useful and

beneficial for the satisfaction of Thérèse’s instincts, the release of this energy will be deleterious for the future life of the heroine as discussed later in this paper.

The personality of Laurent

A first glimpse inside the mind of Laurent is given by Zola in these passages: “Laurent parlait d’une voix tranquille ... Au fond, c’était un paresseux, ayant des appétits sanguins, des désirs très arrêtés de jouissances faciles et durables” ([20] p. 60); “Ce monde de jouissances brutales lui laisse de cuisants besoins de chair” ([20] p. 61); “ Il calcula tous les incidents possibles d’une liaison avec Thérèse; il se décida seulement à tenter l’aventure” ([20] p. 67). This character’s personality can be analysed with reference to Freud’s theories concerning the tripartite structure of the mind which conceives the psyche as divided into three parts: Id, Ego and Super-Ego [12]. The Id represents the instinctual life, is governed by the pleasure principle and is completely unconscious; the Ego is the part that is concerned with perception, emotions and will, is related to the reality principle and is primarily conscious; the Super-Ego refers to morality, values and principles of conduct and is mainly unconscious. As a matter of fact, Laurent’s Id is dominant, seeks for an immediate gratification of his evident passions, and is expressed in his fantastic activity such as the main idea of possessing Thérèse. His Super-Ego is weak and immoral since he behaves dishonestly (“Pour lui, Thérèse, il est vrai, était laide, et il ne l’aimait pas; mais, en somme, elle ne lui coûterait rien”, [20] p. 68), while his Ego lacks the ability to properly reflect on the consequences of his actions as he is apparently a childish person. The main aspect of this character is that of not having true and genuine feelings of love for a woman but a longing for prevarication and subjugation as well as an urge to satisfy immediately his sexual needs. This mental asset resembles that of a criminal mind according to Clark [13] who suggests that individuals with a weak and immature Ego are disrespectful of social norms, typically ignore behaving according to moral rules and consequently engage in criminal acts. As a matter of fact, Laurent’s misbehaviour and

neglect of social conventions is described early in the novel by his defiant attitude towards his father (a figure who generally contributes to the development of the Super-Ego!) and by his frivolity concerning life: “Mais je ne sais pas ... Nous sommes brouillés; il y a cinq ans que nous ne nous écrivons plus” ([20] p. 59). Moreover, the apex of his criminal disposition is reached in the moment of Camille’s murder, which was premeditated and enjoyable as shown in the novel: “Une joie lourde et anxieuse, la joie du crime accompli, l’emplissait ([20] p. 115). This last passage gives a clear idea of a person who is not reflecting on the consequences of his act and is clearly satisfied of committing a murder. In the end, Laurent demonstrates to have most of the clinical features of antisocial personality [14] which are lack of remorse, arrogance, intimidation, aggressiveness, cold-bloodedness, manipulation, charm, personal gain and even pleasure. This criminal attitude will inevitably cause some psychological distress, not initially as for Thérèse but some weeks after killing Camille as discussed in the following section of this paper.

The problem with guilt

The assassination of Camille represents a turning point in the plot of the novel as feelings of guilt will cause much distress for the two lovers since Laurent will become an obsessional and paranoid man while Thérèse will turn into a severe depressed person. This distinction may be related to their different responsibilities as Laurent was the principal actor of the crime while Thérèse is depicted as a passive accomplice. In this regard, Carl Gustav Jung’s theories on extraverted and introverted personalities can provide valid insights to better comprehend these characters’ personalities in relation to their crime. Jung [15] elaborated the distinction between extraversion and introversion when describing his psychological types and concluded that there exist two groups of psychological individuals, the extraverted and the introverted, who differentiate according to how they think, feel, perceive and judge. The extraverted type is object-oriented, his thoughts and actions are influenced by circumstances, his behaviour may be risky and harmful and is rather childish and egoistical. The introverted type is guided more by a subjective point of view

rather than being strictly influenced by the object, is more independent when relating to others, his thoughts are rather fantastical than concrete while feelings and sensations are reserved, secretive and self-oriented. Thérèse is likely associated with the introverted type because she is rather reflective, quiet, independent, thinks a lot before speaking and avoids being at the centre of people’s attention. Zola makes interesting remarks on his character’s introversion in the following passage: “La jeune fille semblait rester froide et indifférente ... ses grands yeux sur Camille et le regardait d’un calme souverain ... ses lèvres seules avaient alors de petits mouvements imperceptibles” ([20] p. 43). Additionally, when Laurent explicated clearly his intention to kill her husband, she reacted as follows: “Thérèse avait repris son visage muet et rechigné. Elle était plus immobile, plus impenetrable, plus paisible que jamais” ([20], p. 97). On the contrary, Laurent is associated with Jung’s extraverted type since his behaviour and thoughts are influenced by contexts and by the people with whom he relates. He ignores the consequences of his actions, is primarily a prevaricator and imposes himself with force. The two lovers’ relationship is clearly unbalanced as it often happens in the case of a killer and his/her accomplice [16]. Laurent is the active, sadistic and dominant extraverted type while Thérèse is the passive, dependant and subservient introverted one. This explains the active and dynamic role of the man in the murder while the lady had a rather passive and compliant attitude. In the end, they are partners in love and in crime since they need each other, Laurent for the satisfaction of his sexual and economical necessities and Thérèse because of her longing for a strong and attractive male figure, likely a substitute for the father she could never attach to. Yet, both did not consider the consequences of their criminal act, in particular the insurgence of guilt which will have devastating effects on their mental equilibrium.

The association between feelings of guilt and psychiatric disorders is scientifically demonstrated [17] and the most frequent clinical manifestations are the onset of depression associated with somatic symptoms

and the outbreak of obsessions with anxiety. Thérèse's psychological reaction to Camille's death is almost immediate: "Lorsque Thérèse sortit de son évanouissement, elle eut une crise de nerfs, elle éclatâ en sanglots" ([20], p.113). She will never fully recover from her state even months after the incident as shown in another passage: "elle éprouvait des angoisses vives ... Elle finit par laisser sa bougie allumée, par ne plus vouloir dormir" ([20], p.161). She will then suffer from a severe form of depression with insomnia and anguish which is paradoxically disguised by pretending to be the inconsolable widow, especially in front of her aunt and mother-in-law: "Thérèse avait pris une attitude morne et désespérée qui, ... inquiéta Mme Raquin" ([20], p.167). Despite this contradictory behaviour, the pain of living will manifest itself in Thérèse with an empty marriage, prolonged sadness, chronic feelings of guilt, lack of pleasure and interest for life and, in the end, suicide [18]. On the contrary, Laurent's sense of guilt will manifest itself with obsessions, paranoia and hallucinations, a more severe form of mental distress compared to his lover, maybe in relation to his primary responsibility in the criminal act. Zola represents the mental state of his character in many passages of the novel, first by depicting the frequent visits to the obituary in search of Camille's body: "Laurent se donna la tache de passer chaque matin par la Morgue ... il allait pendant plus de huit jours, régulièrement " ([20], p. 124), then, by describing the onset of hallucinations: "... il entendait une sorte de grattement ... il s'imagina que ce grattement venait du portrait, que Camille descendait de son cadre ([20], p.196), and, lastly, by highlighting the decline to paranoia: "Camille est entré dans ce chat, pensa-t-il. Il faudra que je tue cette bête ... Elle a l'air d'une personne." ([20], p.197). It is clear at this point that guilt may be responsible of a severe nervous breakdown in criminal offenders. Freud, on the contrary, had the idea that criminal behaviour can be considered as a consequence of feelings of guilt [19] since the individual feels the urge to punish himself. The sense of guilt seems to be linked to the Oedipal phase of a child's psychosexual development in which it is commonly observed that a child wishes to kill the parent of the same sex. If this

hypothesis is true, then Laurent might have felt a strong desire to get rid of his father with whom he did not have a good relationship, as shown by the novelist : "Le père mourra bien un des ces jours; j'attends ça pour vivre sans rien faire" ([20], p. 60), and consequently he felt guilty with an unconscious need to punish himself for being such a naughty son. Laurent, a man who had feelings of guilt towards his father in the past, murders in the present time another man, Camille, because a rival for a female (or maternal) love. Whatever the psychological explanation, the burden of guilt will lead Laurent to commit suicide, an intent shared by Thérèse and performed by the couple right in front of Mme Raquin, a family member who, with no doubt, symbolises the punishing Super-Ego.

IV. CONCLUSION

The first reactions that Zola received from critics were of disgust and abhorrence because of the explicit sexual representations and the cruelty of the main characters' behaviour. In response to the hypercritical comments made by his contemporaries, the author remarked in his second preface to the novel that his idea was to provide a scientific and objective representation of the true nature of humankind. This was indeed at the basis of Naturalism since the characters of a novel were commonly treated as a phenomenon to discern and to investigate. In fact, Zola affirmed that: "J'ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, ... entraînés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chair" ([20], p. 24) and then added that Thérèse and Laurent were, in the end, two brutes guided by their passions and instincts. It appears that the former needed a strong, handsome and sexual attractive male figure to satisfy her phantasies of a savage and feral love while the latter was an opportunistic, narcissistic and ruthless bastard who took advantage of the situation for his own benefit. Interestingly, it was also the time that Freud's theories on the nature of sexual urges, aggressive drives and unexpressed/repressed emotions were starting to be elaborated and then introduced to the scientific community.

Therefore, it is likely that the scientific, cultural and ideological trends of the late nineteenth century influenced the author's writing styles and literary choices, refining his sense of observation. In any case, this paper demonstrates that the two disciplines, literature and psychoanalysis, have many points in common and that their reciprocal interaction may provide a deeper understanding of literary works on one side and a valid application of psychoanalytical theories on the other. Zola himself had asserted that, in writing *Thérèse Raquin*, he got lost in a precise and meticulous portrait of mankind with an emphasis on the analysis of human functioning. As a matter of fact, his approach to life and literature was from a biological and psychological perspective.

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