

# **Emile Zola**

William Dean Howells

# Table of Contents

<b>Emile Zola</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>William Dean Howells</u> .....	1
<u>I</u> .....	1
<u>II</u> .....	2
<u>III</u> .....	3
<u>IV</u> .....	4
<u>V</u> .....	4
<u>VI</u> .....	5

# Emile Zola

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- I
  - II
  - III
  - IV
  - V
  - VI
- 

In these times of electrical movement, the sort of construction in the moral world for which ages were once needed, takes place almost simultaneously with the event to be adjusted in history, and as true a perspective forms itself as any in the past. A few weeks after the death of a poet of such great epical imagination, such great ethical force, as Emile Zola, we may see him as clearly and judge him as fairly as posterity alone was formerly supposed able to see and to judge the heroes that antedated it. The present is always holding in solution the elements of the future and the past, in fact; and whilst Zola still lived, in the moments of his highest activity, the love and hate, the intelligence and ignorance, of his motives and his work were as evident, and were as accurately the measure of progressive and retrogressive criticism, as they will be hereafter in any of the literary periods to come. There will never be criticism to appreciate him more justly, to depreciate him more unjustly, than that of his immediate contemporaries. There will never be a day when criticism will be of one mind about him, when he will no longer be a question, and will have become a conclusion. A conclusion is an accomplished fact, something finally ended, something dead; and the extraordinary vitality of Zola, when he was doing the things most characteristic of him, forbids the notion of this in his case. Like every man who embodies an ideal, his individuality partook of what was imperishable in that ideal. Because he believed with his whole soul that fiction should be the representation, and in no measure the misrepresentation, of life, he will live as long as any history of literature survives. He will live as a question, a dispute, an affair of inextinguishable debate; for the two principles of the human mind, the love of the natural and the love of the unnatural, the real and the unreal, the truthful and the fanciful, are inalienable and indestructible.

### I

Zola embodied his ideal inadequately, as every man who embodies an ideal must. His realism was his creed, which he tried to make his deed; but, before his fight was ended, and almost before he began to forebode it a losing fight, he began to feel and to say (for to feel, with that most virtuous and voracious spirit, implied saying) that he was too much a romanticist by birth and tradition, to exemplify realism in his work. He could not be all to the cause he honored that other men were—men like Flaubert and Maupassant, and Tourguenieff and Tolstoy, and Galdos and Valdes—because his intellectual youth had been nurtured on the milk of romanticism at the breast of his mother—time. He grew up in the day when the great novelists and poets were romanticists, and what he came to abhor he had first adored. He was that pathetic paradox, a prophet who cannot practise what he preaches, who cannot build his doctrine into the edifice of a living faith. Zola was none the less, but all the more, a poet in this. He conceived of reality poetically and always saw his human documents, as he began early to call them, ranged in the form of an epic poem. He fell below the greatest of the Russians, to whom alone he was

## Emile Zola

inferior, in imagining that the affairs of men group themselves strongly about a central interest to which they constantly refer, and after whatever excursions definitely or definitively return. He was not willingly an epic poet, perhaps, but he was an epic poet, nevertheless; and the imperfection of his realism began with the perfection of his form. Nature is sometimes dramatic, though never on the hard and fast terms of the theatre, but she is almost never epic; and Zola was always epic. One need only think over his books and his subjects to be convinced of this: "L'Assommoir" and drunkenness; "Nana" and harlotry; "Germinal" and strikes; "L'Argent" and money getting and losing in all its branches; "Pot-Bouille" and the cruel squalor of poverty; "La Terre" and the life of the peasant; "Le Debacle" and the decay of imperialism. The largest of these schemes does not extend beyond the periphery described by the centrifugal whirl of its central motive, and the least of the Rougon-Macquart series is of the same epicity as the grandest. Each is bound to a thesis, but reality is bound to no thesis. You cannot say where it begins or where it leaves off; and it will not allow you to say precisely what its meaning or argument is. For this reason, there are no such perfect pieces of realism as the plays of Ibsen, which have all or each a thesis, but do not hold themselves bound to prove it, or even fully to state it; after these, for reality, come the novels of Tolstoy, which are of a direction so profound because so patient of aberration and exception.

We think of beauty as implicated in symmetry, but there are distinctly two kinds of beauty: the symmetrical and the unsymmetrical, the beauty of the temple and the beauty of the tree. Life is not more symmetrical than a tree, and the effort of art to give it balance and proportion is to make it as false in effect as a tree clipped and trained to a certain shape. The Russians and the Scandinavians alone seem to have risen to a consciousness of this in their imaginative literature, though the English have always unconsciously obeyed the law of our being in their generally crude and involuntary formulations of it. In the northern masters there is no appearance of what M. Ernest Dupuy calls the joiner-work of the French fictionalists; and there is, in the process, no joiner-work in Zola, but the final effect is joiner-work. It is a temple he builds, and not a tree he plants and lets grow after he has planted the seed, and here he betrays not only his French school but his Italian instinct.

In his form, Zola is classic, that is regular, symmetrical, seeking the beauty of the temple rather than the beauty of the tree. If the fight in his day had been the earlier fight between classicism and romanticism, instead of romanticism and realism, his nature and tradition would have ranged him on the side of classicism, though, as in the later event, his feeling might have been romantic. I think it has been the error of criticism not to take due account of his Italian origin, or to recognize that he was only half French, and that this half was his superficial half. At the bottom of his soul, though not perhaps at the bottom of his heart, he was Italian, and of the great race which in every science and every art seems to win the primacy when it will. The French, through the rhetoric of Napoleon III., imposed themselves on the imagination of the world as the representatives of the Latin race, but they are the least and the last of the Latins, and the Italians are the first. To his Italian origin Zola owed not only the moralistic scope of his literary ambition, but the depth and strength of his personal conscience, capable of the austere puritanism which underlies the so-called immoralities of his books, and incapable of the peculiar lubricity which we call French, possibly to distinguish it from the lubricity of other people rather than to declare it a thing solely French. In the face of all public and private corruptions, his soul is as Piagnone as Savonarola's, and the vices of Arrabbiati, small and great, are always his text, upon which he preaches virtue.

## II

Zola is to me so vast a theme that I can only hope here to touch his work at a point or two, leaving the proof of my sayings mostly to the honesty of the reader. It will not require so great an effort of his honesty now, as it once would, to own that Zola's books, though often indecent, are never immoral, but always most terribly, most pitilessly moral. I am not saying now that they ought to be in every family library, or that they could be edifyingly committed to the hands of boys and girls; one of our first publishing houses is about to issue an edition even of the Bible "with those passages omitted which are usually skipped in reading aloud"; and it is always a question how much young people can be profitably allowed to know; how much they do know, they alone can tell. But as to the intention of Zola in his books, I have no doubt of its righteousness. His books may be, and I suppose they

## Emile Zola

often are, indecent, but they are not immoral; they may disgust, but they will not deprave; only those already rotten can scent corruption in them, and these, I think, may be deceived by effluvia from within themselves.

It is to the glory of the French realists that they broke, one and all, with the tradition of the French romanticists that vice was or might be something graceful, something poetic, something gay, brilliant, something superior almost, and at once boldly presented it in its true figure, its spiritual and social and physical squalor. Beginning with Flaubert in his "Madame Bovary," and passing through the whole line of their studies in morbid anatomy, as the "Germinie Lacerteux" of the Goncourts, as the "Bel-Ami" of Maupassant, and as all the books of Zola, you have portraits as veracious as those of the Russians, or those of Defoe, whom, indeed, more than any other master, Zola has made me think of in his frankness. Through his epicality he is Defoe's inferior, though much more than his equal in the range and implication of his work.

A whole world seems to stir in each of his books; and, though it is a world altogether bent for the time being upon one thing, as the actual world never is, every individual in it seems alive and true to the fact. M. Brunetiere says Zola's characters are not true to the French fact; that his peasants, working-men, citizens, soldiers are not French, whatever else they may be; but this is merely M. Brunetiere's word against Zola's word, and Zola had as good opportunities of knowing French life as Mr. Brunetiere, whose aesthetics, as he betrays them in his instances, are of a flabbiness which does not impart conviction. Word for word, I should take Zola's word as to the fact, not because I have the means of affirming him more reliable, but because I have rarely known the observant instinct of poets to fail, and because I believe that every reader will find in himself sufficient witness to the veracity of Zola's characterizations. These, if they are not true to the French fact, are true to the human fact; and I should say that in these the reality of Zola, unreal or ideal in his larger form, his epicality, vitally resided. His people live in the memory as entirely as any people who have ever lived; and, however devastating one's experience of them may be, it leaves no doubt of their having been.

### III

It is not much to say of a work of literary art that it will survive as a record of the times it treats of, and I would not claim high value for Zola's fiction because it is such a true picture of the Second Empire in its decline; yet, beyond any other books have the quality that alone makes novels historical. That they include everything, that they do justice to all sides and phases of the period, it would be fatuous to expect, and ridiculous to demand. It is not their epical character alone that forbids this; it is the condition of every work of art, which must choose its point of view, and include only the things that fall within a certain scope. One of Zola's polemical delusions was to suppose that a fiction ought not to be selective, and that his own fictions were not selective, but portrayed the fact without choice and without limitation. The fact was that he was always choosing, and always limiting. Even a map chooses and limits, far more a picture. Yet this delusion of Zola's and its affirmation resulted in no end of misunderstanding. People said the noises of the streets, which he supposed himself to have given with graphophonic fulness and variety, were not music; and they were quite right. Zola, as far as his effects were voluntary, was not giving them music; he openly loathed the sort of music they meant just as he openly loathed art, and asked to be regarded as a man of science rather than an artist. Yet, at the end of the ends, he was an artist and not a man of science. His hand was perpetually selecting his facts, and shaping them to one epical result, with an orchestral accompaniment, which, though reporting the rudest noises of the street, the vulgarest, the most offensive, was, in spite of him, so reporting them that the result was harmony.

Zola was an artist, and one of the very greatest, but even before and beyond that he was intensely a moralist, as only the moralists of our true and noble time have been. Not Tolstoy, not Ibsen himself, has more profoundly and indignantly felt the injustice of civilization, or more insistently shown the falsity of its fundamental pretensions. He did not make his books a polemic for one cause or another; he was far too wise and sane for that; but when he began to write them they became alive with his sense of what was wrong and false and bad. His tolerance is less than Tolstoy's, because his resignation is not so great; it is for the weak sinners and not for the strong, while

## Emile Zola

Tolstoy's, with that transcendent vision of his race, pierces the bounds where the shows of strength and weakness cease and become of a solidarity of error in which they are one. But the ethics of his work, like Tolstoy's, were always carrying over into his life. He did not try to live poverty and privation and hard labor, as Tolstoy does; he surrounded himself with the graces and the luxuries which his honestly earned money enabled him to buy; but when an act of public and official atrocity disturbed the working of his mind and revolted his nature, he could not rest again till he had done his best to right it.

### IV

The other day Zola died (by a casualty which one fancies he would have liked to employ in a novel, if he had thought of it), and the man whom he had befriended at the risk of all he had in the world, his property, his liberty, his life itself, came to his funeral in disguise, risking again all that Zola had risked, to pay the last honors to his incomparable benefactor.

It was not the first time that a French literary man had devoted himself to the cause of the oppressed, and made it his personal affair, his charge, his inalienable trust. But Voltaire's championship of the persecuted Protestant had not the measure of Zola's championship of the persecuted Jew, though in both instances the courage and the persistence of the vindicator forced the reopening of the case and resulted in final justice. It takes nothing from the heroism of Voltaire to recognize that it was not so great as the heroism of Zola, and it takes nothing from the heroism of Zola to recognize that it was effective in the only country of Europe where such a case as that of Dreyfus would have been reopened; where there was a public imagination generous enough to conceive of undoing an act of immense public cruelty. At first this imagination was dormant, and the French people conceived only of punishing the vindicator along with victim, for daring to accuse their processes of injustice. Outrage, violence, and the peril of death greeted Zola from his fellow-citizens, and from the authorities ignominy, fine, and prison. But nothing silenced or deterred him, and, in the swift course of moral adjustment characteristic of our time, an innumerable multitude of those who were ready a few years ago to rend him in pieces joined in paying tribute to the greatness of his soul, at the grave which received his body already buried under an avalanche of flowers. The government has not been so prompt as the mob, but with the history of France in mind, remembering how official action has always responded to the national impulses in behalf of humanity and justice, one cannot believe that the representatives of the French people will long remain behind the French people in offering reparation to the memory of one of the greatest and most heroic of French citizens.

It is a pity for the government that it did not take part in the obsequies of Zola; it would have been well for the army, which he was falsely supposed to have defamed, to have been present to testify of the real service and honor he had done it. But, in good time enough, the reparation will be official as well as popular, and when the monument to Zola, which has already risen in the hearts of his countrymen, shall embody itself in enduring marble or perennial bronze, the army will be there to join in its consecration.

### V

There is no reason why criticism should affect an equal hesitation. Criticism no longer assumes to ascertain an author's place in literature. It is very well satisfied if it can say something suggestive concerning the nature and quality of his work, and it tries to say this with as little of the old air of finality as it can manage to hide its poverty in.

After the words of M. Chaumie at the funeral, "Zola's life work was dominated by anxiety for sincerity and truth, an anxiety inspired by his great feelings of pity and justice," there seems nothing left to do but to apply them to the examination of his literary work. They unlock the secret of his performance, if it is any longer a secret, and they afford its justification in all those respects where without them it could not be justified. The question of immorality has been set aside, and the indecency has been admitted, but it remains for us to realize that anxiety

## Emile Zola

for sincerity and truth, springing from the sense of pity and justice, makes indecency a condition of portraying human nature so that it may look upon its image and be ashamed.

The moralist working imaginatively has always had to ask himself how far he might go in illustration of his thesis, and he has not hesitated, or if he has hesitated, he has not failed to go far very far. Defoe went far, Richardson went far, Ibsen has gone far, Tolstoy has gone far, and if Zola went farther than any of these, still he did not go so far as the immoralists have gone in the portrayal of vicious things to allure where he wished to repel. There is really such a thing as high motive and such a thing as low motive, though the processes are often so bewilderingly alike in both cases. The processes may confound us, but there is no reason why we should be mistaken as to motive, and as to Zola's motive I do not think M. Chaumie was mistaken. As to his methods, they by no means always reflected his intentions. He fancied himself working like a scientist who has collected a vast number of specimens, and is deducing principles from them. But the fact is, he was always working like an artist, seizing every suggestion of experience and observation, turning it to the utmost account, piecing it out by his invention, building it up into a structure of fiction where its origin was lost to all but himself, and often even to himself. He supposed that he was recording and classifying, but he was creating and vivifying. Within the bounds of his epical scheme, which was always factitious, every person was so natural that his characters seemed like the characters of biography rather than of fiction. One does not remember them as one remembers the characters of most novelists. They had their being in a design which was meant to represent a state of things, to enforce an opinion of certain conditions; but they themselves were free agencies, bound by no allegiance to the general frame, and not apparently acting in behalf of the author, but only from their own individuality. At the moment of reading, they make the impression of an intense reality, and they remain real, but one recalls them as one recalls the people read of in last week's or last year's newspaper. What Zola did was less to import science and its methods into the region of fiction, than journalism and its methods; but in this he had his will only so far as his nature of artist would allow. He was no more a journalist than he was a scientist by nature; and, in spite of his intentions and in spite of his methods, he was essentially imaginative and involuntarily creative.

## VI

To me his literary history is very pathetic. He was bred if not born in the worship of the romantic, but his native faith was not proof against his reason, as again his reason was not proof against his native faith. He preached a crusade against romanticism, and fought a long fight with it, only to realize at last that he was himself too romanticistic to succeed against it, and heroically to own his defeat. The hosts of romanticism swarmed back over him and his followers, and prevailed, as we see them still prevailing. It was the error of the realists whom Zola led, to suppose that people like truth in fiction better than falsehood; they do not; they like falsehood best; and if Zola had not been at heart a romanticist, he never would have cherished his long delusion, he never could have deceived with his vain hopes those whom he persuaded to be realistic, as he himself did not succeed in being.

He wished to be a sort of historiographer writing the annals of a family, and painting a period; but he was a poet, doing far more than this, and contributing to creative literature as great works of fiction as have been written in the epic form. He was a paradox on every side but one, and that was the human side, which he would himself have held far worthier than the literary side. On the human side, the civic side, he was what he wished to be, and not what any perversity of his elements made him. He heard one of those calls to supreme duty, which from time to time select one man and not another for the response which they require; and he rose to that duty with a grandeur which had all the simplicity possible to a man of French civilization. We may think that there was something a little too dramatic in the manner of his heroism, his martyrdom, and we may smile at certain turns of rhetoric in the immortal letter accusing the French nation of intolerable wrong, just as, in our smug Anglo-Saxon conceit, we laughed at the procedure of the emotional courts which he compelled to take cognizance of the immense misdeed other courts had as emotionally committed. But the event, however indirectly and involuntarily, was justice which no other people in Europe would have done, and perhaps not any people of this more enlightened continent.

## Emile Zola

The success of Zola as a literary man has its imperfections, its phases of defeat, but his success as a humanist is without flaw. He triumphed as wholly and as finally as it has ever been given a man to triumph, and he made France triumph with him. By his hand, she added to the laurels she had won in the war of American Independence, in the wars of the Revolution for liberty and equality, in the campaigns for Italian Unity, the imperishable leaf of a national acknowledgement of national error.