

## Suicide according to Zola

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To investigate the fiction of Emil Zola to understand the beliefs of the author and his readers (second half 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France) regarding the triggers of suicide.

**Method:** Four novels were examined: *Térèse Raquin* (1867), *The Fortune of the Rougons* (1871), *Germinal* (1885), and *The Beast Within* (1890).

**Results:** Five completed suicides were related, triggered in two instances by loss of a spouse and in three cases by guilt. Suicide (or related behaviour) was mentioned on more than 20 further occasions, all as a consequence of settings of discontent. There was no instance of suicide secondary to mental disorder.

**Conclusion:** Triggers of suicide in the second half 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France were not exclusively the result of mental disorder, at least in the opinion of Zola and his readers, and were not unlike those in the contemporary Western world.

### Introduction

Inductive reasoning provided the inaccurate belief that all suicide is the result of mental disorder. This is derived from the accurate observation that suicide is more common among the mentally disordered than the non-mentally disordered. This misstep is encouraged by the 'self-evident truth' that you would have to be mad to want to die, and the happy expectation of suicide prevention promised by the medical model<sup>1</sup>.

While certain authorities, such as the ancient Greek philosopher Plato<sup>2</sup>, suggested a broad conceptualization of the triggers of suicide, for most of recorded history, suicide has been explained as the work of the Devil, inadequately resisted by (therefore) blameworthy individuals<sup>3</sup>.

We are working to provide a broader understanding of suicide through the work of novelists from different places and historical times. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when considering this topic, there was a tendency to reject the observations of any but clinicians. When friends or family stated there had been no evidence of mental illness, the rebuttal was that lay individuals did not have the training to recognize clinical signs and symptoms.

The distinction between fiction (especially realistic) and non-fiction is often blurred and there is overlap rather than mutual exclusion. What is written must be acceptable to the author and the readers - this extends to an acceptable degree of believability<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, fiction is a useful source of information<sup>5</sup>. It has been used to teach moral philosophy<sup>6</sup>, and other aspects of social science<sup>7</sup>. Recently, Zola's novel, 'The Beast Within', was used to stimulate insight into the case of a contemporary serial killer<sup>8</sup>.

Zola wrote in the ‘naturalism/realism’ style which favours fact, logic and impersonality. In this approach, the approach the author attempts to analyse and describe the forces which influence behaviour<sup>9</sup>.

Zola (1840-1902) wrote dozens of novels, the first when he was 28 years of age, with others published in the year before his death and posthumously. He lived most of his life in France and was active in politics.

The aim is to study some works by Zola, with a view to understanding thinking about suicide in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, with a long-term goal of developing a comprehensive (historical and geographical) cognizance of the subject.

## Method

We examined four novels: *Térèse Raquin* (1867)<sup>10</sup>, *The Fortune of the Rougons* (1871)<sup>11</sup>, *Germinal* (1885)<sup>12</sup>, and *The Beast Within* (1890)<sup>13</sup>.

Each book was studied, along with critical reviews. The details of completed suicides (name, role, method and mental disorder) were tabulated, and other mentions of suicide and related topics, such as the wish to be dead, were also listed.

## Results

Four novels published between 1867 and 1890 were examined. Five completed suicides were related, and the topic was mentioned on more than 20 further occasions. In completed suicide, in two cases the trigger was loss of the spouse, and in three cases, guilt as a consequence of having committed murder. In no instance was mental disorder a clear trigger. The topic of suicide was mentioned in various settings of discontent – unpleasant home situations, separation from loved ones, poverty, and as a means of controlling the action of others.

### A. Térèse Raquin

Completed suicide – three instances (see Table 1)

Other mentions of suicide or related matters:

1. “I dreamed of throwing myself in the Seine one day” – Térèse to Laurent, telling she is discontented living with her husband and mother-in-law (p. 36).
2. ‘she could let herself die of hunger’ – Madam Raquin, her son had died and she was paralysed (194).
3. “...my life unbearable. I’d rather end it.” - Térèse to Laurent, marital conflict in the aftermath of their having murdered her first husband (p. 207).

**Table 1.** Completed suicide in Térèse Raquin

Suicide	Name	Role	Method	Trigger	Mental disorder
1. (p.78)	Unnamed	A girl	Hanged	Desperate love	Not suggested
2 & 3. (p. 216)	Térèse & Laurent	Leading characters	Poison	Guilt, post murder	Reactive distress/guilt

## B. The Fortune of the Rougons

Completed suicide – one instance (see Table 2)

Other mentions of suicide or related matters:

1. “There were nights when she would have got out of bed, and thrown herself into the Viorne, if with her weak, nervous, nature she had not felt the greatest fear of death” – thoughts of Aunt Didé who is living with, but being harshly treated by, her son. She was always considered strange, but at this point, at least, strangeness may have saved rather than cost her life (Chap II).
2. “...but still desirous of sacrificing himself” – the thoughts of Commander Sicardot, head of the National Guard (Chap III).
3. “It is better to die” – the words of Silvere at the prospect of separation from his love object Miette. “At this longing for death they tightened their embrace” (Chap V).
4. “I will take my gun; I would rather let the insurgents kill me” – the words of Pierre, on learning that he was ruined, having supported the wrong side (Chap VI).

**Table 2.** Completed suicide in The Fortune of the Rougons

Suicide	Name	Role	Method	Trigger	Mental disorder
1. (Chap IV)	Mouret	Journeyman hatter	Hanged	Death of wife	Not suggested

## C. Germinal 1885,

Completed suicide – no accounts.

Other mentions of suicide or related matters:

There are more than 20 statements touching on the subject – a sample of a dozen are listed.

1. Relating to the workers’ lives, the poverty and family disruption resulting from a sustained strike: i) “Was life worth living...?” (Part 3, Chap 2), ii) “They might as well jump into the canal in a band” (Part 3, Chap 5), iii) “I’d rather kill them and myself too” (Part 4, Chap 5), iv) “Oh God! Why do you not take us?” (Part 6, Chap 2), v) “...they hoped they would die” (Part 7, Chap 5).
2. Relating to the defiance of workers against the company owners: i) “...we are going to die rather than yield” (Part 4 Chap 7), ii) “...quit by dying together” (Part 5, Chap 6), iii) “...I may as well die on the road” (Part 6, Chap 2), iv) “...I ought to wring my own (neck)” (Part 7, Chap 7)
3. Relating to the difficulties experienced by company owners/financiers: “...he hoped he would die of it...” (Part 6, Chap 1).
4. The treat of suicide as a means of preventing the actions of others: “I’m damned if I don’t fling myself down the shaft before you” (Part 5, Chap 4).
5. Relating to the death of a child (of mine owners): “...what was the good of living, now that they would have to live without her?” (Part 7, Chap 4).

## D. The Beast Within

Completed suicide – one instance (see Table 3)

Other mentions of suicide or related matters:

Only one mention: “She began to walk back to the Rue de Roucher, like a person intent on suicide, quickening her step for fear she might find on one in” (p. 155).

Table 3. Completed suicide in *The Beast Within*

Suicide	Name	Role	Method	Trigger	Mental disorder
1. (p. 375)	Flore	Cousin of Lantier	Train	Guilt, post murder	No solid evidence

## Discussion

Against the argument that suicide is always the result of mental disorder<sup>14</sup> we explored the concept of suicide in the second 19<sup>th</sup>-Century France, which could be derived from fiction of Emile Zola. While the content of the novel may be influenced to some degree by style, in general, the content must be acceptable to the writer and the contemporary reader, thus much is useful to the future investigator.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century (France), in his novel *Scarlet and Black*, Stendhal wrote of his protagonist, “Several times the idea of suicide presented itself to him; this image was full of charm; it was like a vision of blissful rest, of the ice-cold glass of water offered to the poor wretch who is dying of thirst and heat in the desert”<sup>15</sup>.

We examined four novels published between 1867 and 1890. They contain accounts of 5 completed suicides and more than a score of references to suicide as a potential solution. The triggers for the completed suicides were the loss of a spouse and guilt arising from having murdered another. Other mentions of suicide attend a wide range of unwanted human experiences. This finding is consistent with the concept of the leading French scholar, Jean Baechler, who states, “Suicidal behaviour is a response to a problem”<sup>16</sup>.

The belief that suicide is always the result of mental disorder is being strongly challenged<sup>17</sup>. A broad understanding of the factors predisposing to this behaviour will improve our prospects of reducing the rate and successfully managing the aftermath. This paper provides evidence that a range of triggers underpinned suicide in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century, France. We can expect the same applies today, in France and other Western countries.

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