

Original Research Article

## A Psychoanalytical Investigation of Criminal Behaviour in “*La Bête Humaine*” by Émile Zola

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### Article History

Received: 04.02.2026

Accepted: 30.03.2026

Published: 01.04.2026

**Abstract:** Émile Zola, a prominent figure in nineteenth century literature, connects the themes of criminal behaviour and mental complexity in his novel, *La Bête Humaine*. This work reflects the principles of Naturalism, how heredity and environment can shape human behaviour, particularly through the main character, Jacques Lantier. The aim of this paper is to investigate the complex motivations behind violent conduct and criminal acts from a psychoanalytical perspective. This type of literary analysis demonstrates Zola’s ability to portray the dark dimensions of humanity from a psychological point of view in relation to societal pressures and industrial revolution.

**Keywords:** Émile Zola, *La Bête Humaine*, Criminal Behaviour, Psychoanalysis, Literary Criticism.

## 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 (McCarthy, P., 2025) which is considered as an extreme form of realism dealing with a scientific approach to literature and with a special interest in how environment and heredity can influence human behaviour. As a matter of fact, Zola’s novel, *La Bête Humaine*, depicts the complexity of mental functioning and of interpersonal relationships in a realistic and intense way. It is, in fact, a novel that is both scientific, because Zola questions the logical reasons for natural phenomena, and judicial, due to the author's interest in crimes and criminal behaviour. Human emotions are emphasised and expressed in a tumultuous and frenetic way and, additionally, compared to the power and energy of a train, symbol of an era of massive industrialisation. Machine and men merge together in a mixture of repressed impulses and hidden desires that, in the end, blow off in an explosive and dangerous way. The main character, Jacques Lantier, is indeed the main representative of this complex fusion between human beings and modern technology because he is unable to keep under control his dark and obscure side made of sadism, dominant attitude, and control over people who are considered weak or inferior, particularly women (Analyse de *La Bête Humaine* de Zola, 2022). The culmination of this absurd correlation between men and machine is the killing of a woman at the hands of a person who can be considered both a madman and a criminal and, figuratively, a human beast.

The psychodynamic theories of criminal behaviour are very helpful to understand the motives for which a person can commit a crime such as the murder of a partner or a woman, in this case Jacques versus Séverine (Alford, 1998; Patni, 2014; Cordero-Hermida, 2015; Fitzpatrick, 1976 & Guofang, 2024). First, the interaction between the three parts of the mind, Id, Ego and Superego, as described by Freud, can be characterised by the weakness of the Superego whose moral values are overpowered by a deviant and brutal Id which, in turn, is not controlled by the Ego of the individual, especially in the moment the crime is committed. Second, a crime may be the result of a need for punishment because the individual is under the pressure of feelings of guilt that arise from the Superego. As a matter of fact, the criminal behaviour is basically the release of this pressure and therefore the discharge of psychic energy with a relief for the individual. Third, the latent delinquency theory by Abraham highlights the fact that antisocial behaviour may emerge during childhood as a

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**CITATION:** Giuseppe Giordano (2026). A Psychoanalytical Investigation of Criminal Behaviour in “*La Bête Humaine*” by Émile Zola. *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit*, 8(2): 33-36. 33

consequence of bad parenting, traumatic events and lack of emotional care. Moreover, neglect and inadequate support may favour the expression of immoral and violent conduct at a later time in life. Last, the death instinct, a concept first theorised by Freud and later expanded by Melanie Klein, highlights the role of self-destructive inclination as an explanation of aggressive and sadistic behaviour (Writer, 2024). This type of conduct and attitude towards the external world, especially in interpersonal relationships, is likely connected to unresolved conflicts during infancy, pathological relationships with the maternal figure and the repetition of traumatic experiences. In this paper, the psychodynamic theories of criminal behaviour will be discussed in relation to how Zola represents these aspects of criminality and madness in his literary work.

## 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 main character Jacques. The conduct and behaviour of other characters will also be investigated to demonstrate how obscure and wicked can be the nature of some human beings, a recurring theme of the novel and a deep concern for Zola. 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. As such, 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.

## DISCUSSION

### The Criminal Mind of Jacques

A first glimpse of the troubled mind of Jacques is given in chapter two. In the scene in which he tries to kiss Flore (Z, 96-98), the author shows the hidden and undisclosed desire of the hero to kill women to whom he is sexually attracted (*“une fureur semblait le prendre”, “avec la fièvre grandissante, affolante du désir”, “parce qu’il en avait une envie”*). In these passages, Zola represents the psychological conflict of Jacques which can be related to the psychoanalytical concepts of primary aggression and primary masochism (Galdston, 1955). What the reader sees here is the struggle between the wish to love, the sex drive that expresses vitality (*Eros*) and a strong desire to kill the beloved person, that is the death instinct (*Thanatos*) whose final aim is to destroy and exterminate. In the same chapter (Z, 99-101), Zola describes a possible motive hidden behind the tormented soul of Jacques, that of an inherited tract (*“cette fêlure héréditaire”*) that likely derives from his previous traumatic relationship with the maternal figure, Gervaise. It seems that this past experience is a possible reason for which he is angry towards women (*“la bête enragée”*) and a motive for his strong desire to revenge with the recurring idea to demonstrate the superiority of males over females.

Interestingly, there is no murder committed by Jacques until the penultimate chapter, but what the reader gets is the continuous struggle of the hero to overcome his aggressive drives. As a matter of fact, he initially fights his urge to kill (*“un grand froid le dégrisait”*) in the scene in which he ran away from Flore (*“Jacques fuyait dans la nuit mélancolique”*). The terms use, *froid* and *mélancolique* give an idea of the cooling down of an overwhelming impulse and of the gloomy atmosphere of the scene. Therefore, Jacques has no choice but to escape from this painful situation carrying with himself the torment of his thoughts, a getaway which is likely associated with the mechanical movement of the trains (Louâtre, 2004). Throughout the entire novel, the trains are given an animal connotation as they ramble, scam, howl and hiss similarly to a beast in despair and specifically to the troubled personality of the main character. Indeed, there is in the novel an intricate and complex mechanism of projection of emotions and impulses as well as a reciprocal identification between the train and the animal nature of the human being. This aspect is brilliantly represented by Zola in chapter six (Z, 240) when he depicts the effect of the train station’s noises and agitation on the life and existence of another character, Séverine (*“Puis, peu à peu ... la gare sonore et frissonnante entrain dans sa vie”*).

Another situation to discuss is the mental destabilisation of Jacques which is described in chapter seven (Z, 288), during the train blockage due to the snow. In this scene, the psychological condition of the hero is characterised by the insurgence of hallucinations (*“un arbre abattu”, “un drapeau rouge flottant”, “des petards, à chaque minute”*) and physical complaints (*“plus consciences de ses mains, paralysées ...”, “un bras de mort”, “sa peur était de n’être plus”*). The intention of Zola here is to represent the severity and frailty of the human mind which, in stressful conditions, is likely to decompensate. The fallen tree may refer to a lost or dead soul, the floating red flag may symbolise an irritable and fierce temperament while the firework may be associated with the explosive and violent nature of Jacques. For what concerns bodily sensations, the hands and arm that will commit murder at a later time are benumbed and anaesthetised while a sense of depersonalisation and fragmentation of the soul is vividly depicted. The snow and the cold in this scenario both seem to reinforce the idea of inner conflict, despair and eventually death. In fact, it is the final act of the train whose frantic run comes to a halt, an image that foresees the ultimate gesture of the hero, that of killing his passionate lover.

The murder of Séverine is the peak of the emotional tension and mental conflict of Jacques that the reader perceives throughout the entire novel. The concept of resentment and revenge for the dishonest and immoral behaviours of the primordial man is reiterated again in chapter eleven (Z, 480-482) as shown in the following passages: “*Était ça sa soif qui était revenue, de venger des offenses très anciennes*”; “*cette rancune ammassée de mâle en mâle, depuis la première tromperie au fond des cavernes?*”. The comparison of the modern man with the primitive one reinforces the idea of a beast, or rather, of a human beast as specified in the title of the novel. The metaphorical use of the term beast fits perfectly in the case of Jacques who savagely, like a bloodthirsty feline with sharpened teeth and speechless (“*les dents serrées, il ne disait pas un mot*”), strikes its prey to death. The animal nature of the murderer is further emphasized by the final satisfaction of his own desire and the pleasure of finally having subjected a woman to man's will (“*une jouissance énorme le soulevait, dans la pleine satisfaction ... sa souveraineté de mâle*”). This scene clearly conveys the idea of the release of instinctual energies and psychological pressures that characterize criminal behaviour with a final sense of relief for the offender (More, 2023).

Jacques' criminal mind is represented not only with the killing of his loved one but is also evident in the code of silence and attitude of indifference towards the murdered as described by Zola in the final chapter of the novel (Z 486-7). These aspects are well depicted in the following passage: “*Jamais, il ne s'était mieux porté, sans remords, l'air soulagé, dans une grande paix heureuse*” whose description corresponds to the typical personality traits of a criminal offender (Tharshini, N. K., 2021), such as emotional coldness, antisocial behaviour and the absence of remorse and/or guilt for the crime committed. Furthermore, the hero's internal dialogue goes around the belief that he has overcome the craving to kill women, especially now that he is able to lead a normal life. At this point, one might ask where has gone the *fêlure héréditaire* so prominently represented in the previous chapter (“*était-il définitivement guéri, maintenant qu'il avait contenté son affreux besion?*”). As a matter of fact, several indicators of the persistence of a disturbed mind are portrayed in the last lines of the novel, when Jacques begins to argue over jealousy with his colleague Pecqueux. The expression of anger, the physical fight, and the acts of violence perpetrated against each other will bring both of them to a tragic death. It seems like fate had taken revenge on Jacques for Severine's death, the victim he loved too much, and also for the unjust conviction of Cabuche, “*cette bête féroce*”, whose only fault was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Jacques is not the only one who commits a crime in the novel. Other characters are involved in immoral and murderous actions such as Roubaud and Flore, both driven by unconscious motivations and aggressive impulses. Roubaud is responsible of a murder driven by sexual jealousy, a feeling that is likely shared by many other individuals. The problem with this character is his incapacity to manage an outburst of anger that leads him to commit a crime. Moreover, it surprises how indifferent he is towards her wife when she is having an affair with Jacques. Flore, instead, caused a serious railway disaster with many casualties for revenge and then killed herself at a later moment since she was tormented by feelings of guilt. In both cases, there has been a prevarication of destructive impulses generating from the Id of the individual along with a weakening of the Superego whose moral control was likely abated whereas the Ego was eventually accommodating to the inner pressures. In the end, the crimes of Zola's characters are comparable to those committed by real criminals because love and death, possessing and killing represent a true reality, that of the dark foundations of the human soul (Lynes, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Jacques and the locomotive are ultimately both beasts, the former is a human beast because of his ruthless, animal and brutal behaviour, whereas the latter may be conceived as a social beast because it represents the predatory and fierce attitudes of the late twentieth-century industrial society. Zola is apparently much concerned with the term *bête* as this is repeated several times in his novel not only to emphasise the animal and savage nature of human beings but with other meanings. In fact, the term is used to express anger in a difficult and stressful situation, to refer to the female and sexual object, or even just when discussing about something stupid or plainly silly. It seems that the repetition of 'beast' has likely the aim to overemphasize the concept of man's beastliness in its various meanings throughout the entire novel.

In the end, this paper highlights the importance of a psychoanalytical approach to the analysis of literary works. Zola was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, in a historical period in which the industrial revolution, the rapid economic and social changes challenged human values and interpersonal relationships, creating a real human crisis as well as difficult living conditions. It is in this scenario that scientists like Freud and Jung and writers like Zola and Guy de Maupassant began to question the hereditary and environmental causes of mental suffering and emotional distress as well as the malaise of the society in which they lived. As a matter of fact, French literary movement Naturalism conceives the novel as an instrument for the scientific analysis of reality, based on the belief that human experiences are predominantly influenced by genetic or family factors and by the environment in which the individual lives.

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