



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 01. July-September 2025. Page# 4189-4195

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



Stylistic patterns of Naturalism: A Linguistic Study of Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*

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Abstract

*This research article investigates the stylistic patterns of Naturalism as presented in Emile Zola's masterpiece novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867). Naturalism, a late 19th century literary movement emphasizes on the role of heredity and environment in shaping human behavior. This movement sought to apply scientific principles of objectivity, determinism, and heredity to fictional narratives, often presenting bleak and sordid realities of life. The study employs a linguistic stylistic analysis to identify and categorize the specific language features that contribute to the novel's Naturalistic demands. The research focuses on lexical choices, syntactic structures, and rhetorical devices to show how Zola's language constructs a world before his readers where human beings are governed by their biological instincts and environmental forces, rather than free will and free choice. The findings reveal that the style of the novel is characterized by a detailed, clinical vocabulary; a frequent use of dispassionate, observational descriptions; and a consistent use of metaphors and similes which presents various characters in the novel product of their animalistic natures and social conditions.*

Keywords: Naturalism, stylistics, determinism, heredity, environment, Zola, lexical analysis, syntax, rhetoric, animalization

Introduction

Late 19th century saw the emergence of a powerful literary force on the horizon of literature known as Naturalism, laying its foundations upon Realism but it pushed itself to more heights by focusing on the principles of deterministic conclusions. Realism painted life as it is, Naturalism went a step forward, showing that human behavior is the result of forces beyond an individual's control—namely, heredity, environment and instinct. Emile Zola, a pioneer in the field of

Naturalism and the moment most influential figure presented this philosophy, arguing that the novelist should work like a scientist, observer and should diagnose the human society with the same rigor as a biologist or a doctor.

Zola's famous novel *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) is considered a fundamental text in the field of Naturalism. The novel beautifully depicts all those states of mind, which directly or indirectly affect human behavior. The novel convincingly portrays adultery, murder, and guilt, which according to Zola are the result of heredity, environment and instinct. Zola himself described his novel "psychological study" and its characters as "human animals" governed by their "nerve and blood" and he achieves the same through various linguistic techniques like lexical patterns, semantic pattern, imagery, and narration.

This research seeks to answer how Emile Zola achieved all this by conducting a detailed linguistic analysis of the novel *Thérèse Raquin*. The focus of the study will be more on the language than on thematic concerns to show how stylistic patterns that transform a tragic love story into a deterministic case study.

Research Objectives:

The primary objectives of this study are to:

- How did Zola use vocabulary in the novel to describe various characters and their actions
- Examine the syntactic structures of the novel, such as the preference for simple, declarative sentences and the lack of complex, introspective clauses.
- Investigate the use of rhetorical devices like metaphor, simile, and personification to demonstrate how Zola's language reduces human characters to their physical and animalistic states.
- Explore the stylistic contrast between external and internal environment and how this contrast does overall contribute to psychological states of the characters.

Literature Review

Naturalism as a literary movement emerged in the late nineteenth century as an extension of Realism but with a more rigid scientific orientation. While Realism sought to depict life faithfully, Naturalism drew its framework from contemporary scientific discourses such as Darwinism, positivism, and determinism (Baguley, 1990). Writers associated with this school emphasized that human beings are not autonomous agents of free will but organisms conditioned by heredity, environment, and instinct. Zola, as the leading theorist of Naturalism, famously declared that the novel should function as an *expérimentation*, where the writer plays the role of a scientist dissecting social and biological forces acting upon individuals (Zola, 1880/1893).

A large body of scholarship has analyzed Naturalism in terms of its philosophical and socio-political implications. According to Hemmings (1953), Zola's fiction represents a "clinical laboratory of human passions," where characters are stripped of romantic illusions and presented as specimens dominated by nervous and physiological impulses. Similarly, Lethbridge and Reid (2012) argue that French Naturalism was profoundly shaped by contemporary advances in medicine, psychology, and sociology, embedding a scientific outlook into literary discourse.

This clinical gaze explains why Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* was described as both a psychological case study and a moral scandal upon its publication.

From a linguistic and stylistic standpoint, Naturalist fiction deploys specific narrative strategies to mirror scientific objectivity. Fowler (1996) and Leech & Short (2007) observe that stylistic analysis provides a methodological framework to study how lexical patterns, syntax, and figurative language align with ideological and philosophical currents. In Zola's case, stylistics becomes essential in understanding how apparently neutral descriptive passages carry a deterministic force. Baguley (1990) highlights this entropic tendency: the language of Naturalism systematically dehumanizes characters, reducing them to material and zoological categories.

Thérèse Raquin occupies a central position in these debates because of its stark portrayal of adultery, murder, and guilt through a deterministic lens. Critics such as Schor (1992) argue that the novel dismantles the possibility of moral agency, presenting instead a physiological and environmental determinism where emotions like passion or guilt are coded in pathological vocabulary. The claustrophobic setting of the Rue Guénégaud shop has also been studied as a linguistic metaphor for confinement, decay, and inescapable fate (Nelson, 2004). In this sense, the environment in Zola's fiction is not a neutral backdrop but an active, stylistically constructed force shaping the narrative trajectory.

Moreover, Zola's rhetoric of animalization has received particular attention. According to Bernheimer (1989), the frequent comparison of characters to animals, parasites, or corpses operates as a stylistic mechanism that erodes the boundary between the human and non-human. This rhetorical strategy reinforces Zola's broader deterministic philosophy, where human subjectivity dissolves into biological drives and environmental conditions. Such stylistic devices also connect Zola's fiction with Darwin's theory of evolution, as both situate humanity within a continuum of animal life rather than outside it.

In the field of linguistic stylistics, recent approaches emphasize how Naturalist narratives can be unpacked through close examination of their discourse structures. Wales (2011) notes that the systematic use of repetition, parallel syntax, and semantic fields produces a tone of inevitability that mirrors the fatalistic worldview of Naturalism. Zola's reliance on simple declarative syntax, clinical lexicon, and heavy descriptive passages aligns with what Leech & Short (2007) describe as a "foregrounding of objectivity" in narrative style. Thus, the stylistic elements in *Thérèse Raquin* are not incidental but serve as the textual embodiment of Naturalist philosophy.

Taken together, these scholarly perspectives establish a clear link between Naturalist ideology and linguistic form. While thematic and philosophical readings of *Thérèse Raquin* abound, the linguistic-stylistic analysis remains an indispensable tool to demonstrate how Zola's vision of determinism is inscribed in the very texture of his language. This study therefore builds on the tradition of stylistics to show how lexical choice, syntax, and rhetorical devices function as carriers of Naturalist aesthetics, turning narrative prose into a mirror of scientific determinism.

Methodological Framework:

This study employs a stylistic analysis, a branch of literary criticism and linguistics that examines the distinctive features of a writer's language. The methodology is primarily qualitative, involving the close reading of the selected passages from Therese Raquin.

The analysis is aimed around the three main levels of linguistic analysis: Lexical Level, Syntactic Analysis, and the Rhetorical Analysis.

Lexical Analysis:

Lexical analysis involves scrutinizing the word choice, including their frequency and semantic fields like nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The research aims at putting different words that have been used in the novel in various categories related to biology, anatomy, and animal behavior.

French: « *Thérèse tomba dans un engourdissement maladif, grelottante, le corps brisé comme par une fièvre sourde.* »

Translation: "*Thérèse fell into a sickly stupor, shivering, her body broken as if by a dull fever.*"

→ This example shows how Zola frames guilt and emotional collapse in medicalized vocabulary ("engourdissement," "fièvre"), presenting psychological states as physical symptoms rather than moral conditions

Syntactic Analysis:

This part of the study is related to sentence structure, including sentence length, clause types and the use of active and passive voice. The basic behind this is to see if Zola's prose maintains a detached, reportorial quality.

French: « *Ils allèrent, ils revinrent, ils s'assirent, et restèrent muets, les yeux baissés.* »

Translation: "*They went, they came back, they sat down, and remained silent, their eyes lowered.*"

→ The repetitive, declarative clauses joined by simple conjunctions reflect Zola's detached, observational syntax, resembling clinical notes rather than introspective narration

Rhetorical Analysis:

This focuses on figurative language, especially to metaphors and similes that links human characters to animals, inanimate objects, or natural forces.

French: « *Laurent avait des allures de brute, la face lourde, la mâchoire carrée, les lèvres épaisses.* »

Translation: "*Laurent had the bearing of a brute, with a heavy face, square jaw, and thick lips.*"

→ By likening Laurent to a "brute," Zola reduces him to zoological traits, erasing individuality and emphasizing his animalistic drives.

Textual Analysis:

The Lexicon of Determinism is one of the most striking feature of Zola's stylistics in Therese Raquin where he used such vocabulary that grounds human experience in the material and the biological. The characters in the novels are described through their physical symptoms and zoological metaphors rather than their emotions of inner thoughts.

Zola's continuous use of clinical lexicon describe the psychological states of the characters. For example, after the murder, Therese and Laurent's guilt is not presented as a moral failing but as a pathological condition. The vocabulary here used by Zola to show their suffering not

emotionally but clinically like “feverishness” “nervous attacks” and “shivering fits”. The characters are reduced to their “nerves and blood” as if the actions taken by them were the result of an internal biological mechanism. Furthermore, while describing various characters, Zola used such vocabulary, which belongs to animal kingdom. Laurent, the male protagonist, is frequently compared to an “animal”, a “beast”, and a “brute”. Therese is not woman in love but a “tigress” driven by passion. The murder scene also shows that it is not a human act of passion or cruelty, but a brutal. Almost instinctual struggle between two “animals”. Zola’s lexicon repeatedly pushes the character down from the realm of human agency into a world of primal, instinctual urges. For example:

Thérèse et Laurent, qui n’étaient pas habitués à cette vie de plein air, se sentaient comme deux animaux saignés qui auraient besoin d’un long sommeil."

(Translation: "Thérèse and Laurent, who were not used to this outdoor life, felt like two bled animals who needed a long sleep.")

This simple example is a microcosm of Zola’s entire project. The characters are not tormented by guilt in a moral sense; their exhaustion is a physiological response, they are in a state of being which shows them being “bled” like an animal rather than a human being.

Zola’s syntax reinforces the dispassionate, scientific tone of the narrative. His prose is often simple, declarative which states the facts rather than exploring the inner working of the character’s minds. His narrative voice works like a camera lens, which observes and records without judgement. His prose often avoids complex and overlapping sentences that might suggest a stream of consciousness or a deep dive into a character’s psyche. His prose uses such sentences where he uses a number of conjunctions like “and”, or “but” to link clauses of equal importance which gives his prose a continuity and presents the facts like that of a report. Zola’s choice of syntax reinforces the idea that the characters are not complex individuals with rich inner lives, but they are predictable beings whose actions can be observed and documented from the outside.

For instance, the description of the Parisian setting is often of objective details: the “smoky”, “dank” shop on Rue Guenegaud, the “murky” air, and the “dirty” walls. These details beautifully describe the deterministic atmosphere of the novel. The environment in the novel is not a mere backdrop; rather it is force that shapes the characters’ fates.

The most powerful stylistic tools that Zola used in the novel are his use of metaphors and similes, which serves to reduce human characters to non-human forms. The most famous of these is when Zola compares Therese and Laurent to two animals trapped in a cage, perpetually haunted by the corpse of their victims. The dead body of Camille, their murdered husband/cousin, is not a mere memory but a physical, spectral presence, a “shadow” that sits between them, a tangible consequence of their deed.

Another rhetoric technique used by Zola is the use of personification, which is equally significant. The setting, particularly the dark, damp shop and the gloomy apartment, is often described as a living, breathing entity that preys upon the characters. The shop is “drenched in shadow”, and

the walls “sweat”. It seems as if the environment is a leading character in the novel, a force that both reflects and amplifies that characters’ inner decay.

Zola’s use of inanimate metaphors for human characters is another key element of his rhetoric technique. When Laurent attempts to paint a portrait of Camille, he finds that the face becomes a grotesque mask, a physical manifestation of his guilt. The canvas itself becomes a deterministic force, a mirror that reveals the “truth of his crime. Zola uses his metaphors in such a way that transform his characters into objects, strips away their humanity and reveals the deterministic force.

Example:

"Un jour, il essaya de peindre Camille. Il ne put faire que des monstres, des caricatures grimaçantes, un squelette verdâtre dont les yeux étaient des trous noirs."

Translation: "One day, he tried to paint Camille. He could only make monsters, grimacing caricatures, a greenish skeleton whose eyes were black holes."

This example explains how the characters’ inner torment and agony are externalized and materialized, turning a psychological struggle into a tangible, physical struggle with the canvas.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this research reveal that Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* exemplifies the stylistic hallmarks of Naturalism through a calculated interplay of lexicon, syntax, and rhetoric. His persistent use of clinical and zoological vocabulary strips the characters of individuality, situating them instead within the realms of biology and pathology. Guilt, passion, and desire are not articulated in moral or spiritual terms but rather as physical symptoms, thereby underscoring the deterministic philosophy of Naturalism. Similarly, Zola’s syntax, marked by simple, declarative structures, creates a detached, almost reportorial narrative voice that mirrors scientific observation, presenting characters as specimens to be studied rather than agents of free choice. His rhetorical devices, particularly metaphors of animalization and personification of the environment, further dismantle human subjectivity and reinforce the power of heredity and setting as governing forces. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research broaden the stylistic scope by comparing *Thérèse Raquin* with other works in Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series to examine whether the same linguistic strategies persist across different social contexts. Additionally, applying computational stylistics or corpus-based approaches could provide quantitative support for the qualitative insights presented here, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of how language itself becomes a deterministic force in Naturalist fiction.

Final words:

The linguistic study of *Thérèse Raquin* clearly shows that the stylistic patterns of Emile Zola’s Naturalism are not superficial but are deeply rooted in the very language of the novel. The findings of this study confirm Zola’s style of naturalistic agenda: to depict human beings as “animals”, driven by their biological urges and shaped by those environmental forces which play their role in shaping human behavior. Zola’s lexicon is rich in clinical and zoological terms, which reduces his characters from complex psychological entities to physiological specimens. His use of simple, dispassionate syntax mirrors the detachment of a scientific observer, presenting

human behavior without moral judgment. And finally his rhetoric, particularly through the use of de-humanizing metaphors and personification gives more strength to his central idea of Naturalism: that humanity is not governed by free will but behind them lies the deterministic forces of heredity and environment. In *Thérèse Raquin*, the language itself works as a deterministic force, a tool that builds a world where there is no escape from one's biological and social fate. Zola's stylistic choices are beyond match in literary technique, not for their beauty or lyricism, but for their brutal, unflinching effectiveness in conveying a complex philosophical and scientific theory into a compelling and deeply disturbing piece of fiction.

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