



## The Conflict Between Human Enterprise and Nature in Emile Zola’s “The Flood”

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### Abstract

Emile Zola is considered as the father of naturalism, a literary movement that underscores the role of heredity and environment in shaping human experience. This study discusses his story “The Flood” (1880) which embodies man’s struggle against nature and illustrates different features of naturalism. The only surviving member of a family hit by a flood retrospectively narrates the details of the calamity. Heart wrenching memories of the family’s unexpected change of fortunes arouse feelings of sympathy, horror, disappointment and anger. At the beginning, the narrator’s farmhouse appears as a safe haven for the whole family. A state of family bliss speaks of their happiness and satisfaction with their success, an outcome of long years of struggle and hard work. The prosperity the family experiences creates harmonious connections with nature as well as forces beyond it; God is seen as a generous friend, and the nearby river is perceived as a good neighbor. However, a stark shift of perceptiveness occurs as nature never remains a permanent good relation. Her arcane disrupting forces rather strike mercilessly and unexpectedly putting an end to the family’s story of success. Zola carefully articulates the psychological dimension of the jarring event including the anxiety and horror experienced by most characters as well as the defense mechanisms used to deal with them. Through stylistic features such as documentary style, literary contrasts and imagery, readers ruefully realize the high price paid by man as a result of this encounter.

**Key words:** French literature; Naturalism; Emile Zola; “The Flood”; Natural disaster; Human enterprise; Defense mechanisms

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### INTRODUCTION

Action in “The Flood” (1880) focuses on the tragedy of an extended family as narrated by Louis Roubien, its oldest member and the only survivor among them. This man represents human struggle and enterprise. As a farmer, he manages to grow crops and raise cattle in a village located a few miles from a river. After long years of hard work, Roubien and his family start to enjoy the fruit of his efforts. They all feel blessed for having rich green groves, pastures and lush fields of wheat and grapes. Their wealth enables them to live happily in a house of their own. Their house gets bigger as the family gets bigger. Their life seems to be encompassed by a sense of security as result of Roubien’s achievement. They all seem to have the impression that poverty has become a thing of the past. However, life does not turn out the way they hope, plan or expect.

Different elements in the story make it a good illustration of naturalistic literature. The story deals with the life of a simple family living together in a farmhouse. Objective narration of details confirms Zola’s naturalistic mien. Neither extraordinary elements like magic nor imaginary creatures constitute action. Thus, characters, setting, point of view and plot show no mythical or legendary aspects. Excluding the imaginary and the supernatural from action, which can be attributed to naturalistic tendencies, does not keep Zola from putting his characters in an extremely thrilling setting and nerve racking conditions. According to the American novelist and critic Norris, “Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted

from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama” (1964/2004, p.22). In “The Flood”, Zola adeptly creates a milieu wherein people standing on the roof of their house feel stranded thousands of miles away from land. Such conditions burden characters with severe emotional, psychological and mental pain endangering their physical as well as emotional wellbeing. This focus on horror and extreme emotional states might have motivated certain critics to establish connections between naturalism and romanticism. For example, Norris says, “Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism” (Ibid., p.23). Here Norris suggests that naturalism has such a wide scope that the movement should not be reduced and imbedded in another movement. Connections with other genres are established by Newlin who points out that naturalism and melodrama have certain features in common like their “vision of human beings caught up in a welter of discreet events that combine to direct and prescribe their actions” (2012, p.4) This trend allows “the frequent intrusion of sensational scenes, improbable coincidences, and stilted rhetoric into fictions that are often derided as merely aesthetically flawed versions of realism.” (Ibid).

Further consideration of action in the story reveals connections with other literary movements like classicism. The heroic behavior, nobility and sacrifice of ordinary people clearly show in attempts made to reach the church whether by climbing the roofs of other houses or by swimming. In addition, attempts made to save the family by making a raft with whatever items thrown by flood water may be seen as an epic of the ordinary. Sacrificing one’s life to leave space for others to survive entails a noteworthy noble spirit. Thus, naturalism can be seen as “an adaptive genre, changing its contours over the course of time” (Ibid., p.3). Newlin’s viewpoint coincides with Zola’s idea that “Naturalism was a progression rather than a genre” (Marriott, 2002, p.12). In other words, naturalism is a rich flexible literary trend combining elements of different genres and leaves the door open for adopting new aspects to keep up with ongoing developments.

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## 1. DEFINING NATURALISM

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Defining naturalism evokes certain challenges. These challenges have been pronounced by authors like Pizer who dedicates a whole chapter entitled “Introduction: The Problem of Definition” to discuss the complexity of defining and bringing about common features of naturalism (1999, pp.1-12). Clark (2016, p.1) also holds “What exactly is naturalism? Naturalism, we will learn, admits of no single, simple definition and comes in a wide variety of shapes and sizes (depending, for example, on its commitment to the natural sciences)”. For the sake of brevity, the researcher focuses on Abrams and Harpham’s (2008) definition which refers to naturalism as “a mode

of fiction that was developed by a school of writers in accordance with a particular philosophical thesis” (p.304). Abrams and Harpham point out connections between naturalism and “post-Darwinian biology in the nineteenth century” (Ibid). They add that naturalism considers man as “a higher-order animal” greatly influenced by “heredity and environment” (Ibid). This definition highlights the role of science (biology) in the inception and development of naturalism. Objective portrayal of events, characters, setting and other fictional elements can be attributed to the impact of the scientific method which sticks to reality and avoids unreasonable flight of imagination. In this regard, Turri (2017) explains that “According to a naturalistic account, we view human agency as subject to the same physical laws as other objects and completely open to scientific investigation” (p.1). Naturalism suggests some connections between human beings and animals. Thus, it is common to find naturalist writers somewhat isolating their characters to study the way they react to action under desperate conditions. This method emulates procedures of studying animal behavior in biology labs. The definition above also highlights the role of heredity and environment in man’s life.

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## 2. THE INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT ON MAN IN “THE FLOOD”

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After introducing himself, Roubien draws a bright image of his family members including his widowed sister, brother, son, and grandchildren. Zola makes use of details creating ties that bind readers to his text by arousing their interest in all its elements. Roubien works hard and becomes “the richest farmer in the parish” (Zola, 2000). A successful farmer is usually expected to be on good terms with the surrounding environment including land, sun, wind, temperature and rain. Thus an affinity between farmer and land comes as no surprise. In other words, a strong bond between characters and land has developed over years of sweat and toil. It could be that this strong relationship has kept the family from moving to a safe place to save their lives. Despite continuous rain for long hours, it never occurs to them that things would be out of the ordinary. The unpredictable nature seems to have failed them. Referring to the river that would later claim the lives of the rest of his family, Roubien says, “But we had confidence in it, and, as long as it did not overflow its banks, we could not look on it as a bad neighbor” (Ibid). Excluding the possibility of imminent hazard, the narrator relies on his memories of seemingly similar past weather conditions that caused them no harm. Hence, a sense of trust develops and appears in the narrator’s presumption that “It is the same every year” (Ibid). In other words, characters seem to become hooked up to their place by mysterious powers. Their achievement and happiness seem to make them oblivious to situations wherein their

lives may be at stake. Satisfied with what they have, they don't contemplate the idea of leaving their village and live a new life somewhere else. Instead of plans or ambitions of moving to city, Roubien says, "we would sooner have built a city behind the farm, in our enclosure. When families are united, it is good to live and die where one has grown up" (Ibid). Neither deserting their village nor living independently away from family members appears as an option to live a better life. None of them has plans to travel or pursue happiness away from their abode.

Thus, it is reasonable to say that a peaceful bond between humans and the surrounding environment including the river here is born of propinquity and circumstance rather than rationality. Tragically, things turn out against all their expectations. Positive attitude towards the world around them does not keep nature from breaking their peace. It takes flood water only a few hours to destroy human accomplishments of long years of hard work.

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### 3. A STATE OF BLISS SUDDENLY SHATTERED BY NATURE

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A significant aspect of Zola's writing is his skill in plot development. The narrator briefly introduces himself and his achievement as a rich farmer. Then, he introduces his family members who all live together in the same house. They all live happily and none of them thinks of moving to another place. A state of peace and harmony develops among family members themselves. They feel lucky and grateful for the kind of life they lead. Thoughts are expressed of God a generous supportive friend who has bestowed upon them the blessings they enjoy.

One blessing is strong family relationships which figure throughout the story. Different characters show positive feelings such as care, compassion, understanding, respect, kindness, solidarity, courage, love and sacrifice. Family unity also remains impenetrable. None of them takes action out of selfishness nor disregard for the safety of the whole group. Harmony and successful communication prevail in their interactions despite their age differences. This healthy atmosphere appears before experiencing the emergency conditions and continues till the end. Having their lives at stake never changes their attitude toward each other. The graver the danger gets, the more united they become.

Household chores, holidays and social occasions convey family bliss. Gaspard helps the servants in dealing with some washed linen items. The birth of a new calf is a happy event for them. On Sundays, they spend their time together telling stories, singing, and enjoying home-made delicacies like cakes and wine. As the family gets bigger by the time, Roubien builds a second story to accommodate them, an achievement that helps keep the family together. Arrangements for the wedding of

Veronica and Gaspard show respect for the old. Roubien is the one who decides the wedding date. Remembering his dead wife and honoring her memory, he chooses Saint Felicite day because it is the name of his late wife. As a man who is seventy years old, he never feels common aging problems like feelings of weakness, worthlessness, insignificance or inability to adapt to surroundings. In fact he feels himself at the center of events in "As for me, I seemed to relive in those two sweethearts, whose happiness seemed to bring a corner of Paradise to our table" (Ibid). He relates his thoughts of such blessings as coming to them "from above" (Ibid). However, this sense of having a kind of divine support proves misleading considering the direct consequences of the flood. Roubien's big disappointment is obvious as he realizes that he was mistaken. Life never guarantees everlasting happiness no matter how circumstances may strongly seem to suggest so.

The dialectic of heredity and environment appears in Zola's characterization. In his memories of Marie, his youngest granddaughter, the narrator describes her as "a real young lady, so white, so fair, that she looked as if born in the city" (Ibid). Marie was born in the village. However, her beautiful physical countenance which is hereditary suggests that she looks like elegant ladies coming from more developed areas. Roubien's remark conveys his warm feelings, closeness to his family members, and appreciation of their assets. He indicates his granddaughter's bright future prospects. His remark also shows the greatness of his loss and pain. Instead of prospects coming true, one finds sudden tragic death. All rescue attempts made by family members go in vain, no matter how much heroic they are.

More blessings appear in characters' attitude towards God. While looking at their prosperous fields, Jacques says: "Well, father, we shall never want for bread nor for wine. You must be a friend of the Divine Power" (Ibid). Bread and wine is a combination with religious significance signifying unity. Sheen explains that "bread is made from a multiplicity of grains of wheat, and wine is made from a multiplicity of grapes, so the many who believe are one in Christ" (2015). Having enough bread and wine indicates the family's self-sufficiency, well-being, successful farming and wealth. These accomplishments lead Jacques to perceive God as a generous friend who has given them showers of "silver" rather than mere showers of rain. The idea of making friendship with God also reverberates in the narrator's language. He agrees with his son and feels lucky that God is protecting their crops from dangers and illnesses caused by cold weather and other natural factors. He further considers God's help as a well-deserved reward for his righteousness as he has never harmed others. This mode of thinking creates linear cause-effect relationships which may miss real life complexity. Being good and doing no harm to others do not necessarily

guarantee good rewards. Real life experiences are unlikely to conform to such perfunctory judgements which may create a fake halo of complacency resulting in grave consequences. Based on simplified and naïve interpretations of reality, such smugness may leave no ground for justified fear for the future. Thus, despite the narrator's old age and long life experiences, he does not seem prepared to extreme danger conditions. He as well as the other characters seem immersed in their daily routine activities unmindful of the possible tragedy. Unfortunately, such possibility remains part of the unthinkable until it gets too late.

Having one's perceptions of life based on linear thinking seems to result in instable and shaky convictions. In times of prosperity, Roubien and Jacques consider God as a friend. This image of God is shaken when their cattle and crops are drowned. Feelings of gratitude disappear as the narrator gets angry and embittered by a sense of betrayal. Roubien seems to put the blame on the sun for not giving clear signs about the catastrophe. His meditations express his disappointment and frustration in "God was not just! We had done nothing wrong against Him, and He was taking everything from us! I shook my fist at the horizon" (Zola, 2000). Roubien's losses make him consider all his past prosperity as a "lie" (Ibid). Referring to the complexity of life, Arthur (2000) explains, "I believe we all struggle with this idea every day and every day, we hear stories or experience the reality of how life really works out ...[sic]the just rewards don't always pour in". The concerns of the public as a whole figure in Zola's work. According to Stromberg (1968, p.xv) , naturalism is interested in "describing unflinchingly the horrors of modern civilization as seen in the lives of poor wretches". For example, poverty is one of the problems that Zola himself faces in his life (Codsi, 2015, p. 31). In fact, the sudden change of fortunes that occurs in the story reflects the insecurities that people feel for different reasons.

Man's confusion and uncertainty are obvious in the story; instead of maintaining a consistent relationship with God regardless of the circumstances, some characters change their attitude depending on the situation. In happy times, God appears as a generous friend, while in hard times, He appears as an unjust opponent stripping people of their property. Thus, Zola's enunciation of character's relationship with God reflects the pain human beings feel when hope and happiness are suddenly lost.

#### 4. RESPONSE TO DANGER AND DEFENCE MECHANISMS

Zola's literary production illustrates the intellectual atmosphere of the time including studies dealing with the human psyche. According to Mayer (2002, p.xii) "Academic psychology dates roughly from 1887". The

story illustrates its author's awareness of the role of emotions in human behavior. While carefully describing a state of family bliss unexpectedly shattered by the merciless nature, Zola skillfully articulates his characters' psychological response to danger. In fact, the flood seems to put characters in a psychological impasse. They use different defense mechanisms to face the disaster in the hope of saving their lives. Cramer (2006, p.4) refers to defense mechanisms as "the mental maneuvers in which we all engage to maintain our psychological equilibrium and protect our self-esteem". Such maneuvers appear in Zola's characters. At first, they seem to misinterpret what might be conceived as the silence that precedes the tempest. When asked about the situation, the narrator relates its quietness as "the leaves are not even moving" (Zola, 2000). However, this quietness does not continue long as flood water reaches the farmhouse where characters live. Different symptoms like anxiety, confusion, loss of consciousness and paleness reflect their discomfort, psychological pain and awareness of a life-threatening condition. They handle the problem using strategies including denial, silence, and anger.

Facing death, a challenge posed by the flood, is not an easy task. It requires characters to take certain measures to save their lives. The horror of such possibility is usually so overwhelming that the human mind tends to deny or negate it. This denial or negation comes as a result of the surprise, unexpectedness and discomfort connected with the event the mind deals with. Denial "refers to a mental operation in which attention is withdrawn from external stimuli that, if recognized, would cause psychological pain or upset" (Cramer, 2006, p.44). In response to Gaspard's remark that weather conditions may turn hazardous, Roubien depends on his previous experience and states that, "nothing will happen. It is the same every year" (Zola, 2000). He is also probably reassuring himself and other family members rather than stating a matter of fact later on in other utterances like, "we have nothing to fear" (Ibid) and "we were not much frightened" (Ibid). Jacques also tries to encourage the family by relating memories of similar conditions that ended safely in the past, and confirms his father's reassuring statements by saying "This will not amount to anything" (Ibid).

Flood water continues rising and the situation gets more serious. Roubien keeps denying the reality of danger although he seems aware of what is going on around him. He pushes his apprehensions back and compels himself to look optimistic. As the oldest member of his family, Roubien feels responsible for boosting their morale and avoiding any behavior that may scare them. When asked if the water is still going up, he tries to hide the truth by suggesting the opposite. Zola here portrays human being's need to manage their emotional responses or stress in order to adapt to scary or unsettling conditions. This adaptation enables them to

stay in control and avoid panic as well as other negative emotions as much as possible.

Under certain circumstances, the physical power of the human body may become not much value. Gaspard appears in the story as a strong young man known for winning tough wrestling matches. However, when it is suggested that flood water may abate and he may be able to get back home within two hours, he gives no answer with "his face quite pale; and I saw him look at Veronique with an expression of anguish" (Ibid). Roubien also tries to silence his brother Pierre as the latter alerts him to the need to tell the others about the rising water. In response to Pierre's suggestion, Roubien "hushed him up by pressing his arm" (Ibid). Silence may suggest giving up. As things get worse "Aunt Agathe said nothing, no longer prayed, no longer made the sign of the cross" (Ibid). Being silent and asking others to be silent reflect the magnitude of distress the characters are going through.

Efforts made to distract women and hide the imminent danger of rising water do not work long as they started to get "pale with feverish hands, and ears on the alert" (Ibid). It is possible to notice their inability to stay focused while playing cards. To deal with this fear, they ask God for help. For example, Aunt Agathe prays as she "made the sign of the cross and mumbled Paters and Aves" (Ibid). As the story unfolds, fear increases and characters feel helpless. They fall to their "knees weeping and stammering supplications" (Ibid). When part of the servant's room collapses and the servants die, Roubien feels cold trembling through his body. "Many people experience cold chills when they are suddenly flush with fear. This is incredibly common before anxiety attacks" (Calm Clinic, 2009). Narrator's fear indicates the vulnerability of the family's condition which is not better than that of their servants. Anxiety and psychological pain also show in Pierre's biting and grinding of his pipe with his teeth as well as in women's weeping and repetitive cries of fear. Such compulsive behavior can be seen as an outlet for their distress and terror. The massive power of the flood leaves them fewer and fewer options to survive. As time passes by, the space under their feet gets smaller and smaller. This gradual loss of control increases their pain resulting in emotional shocks leading some characters to resign themselves to the rising water.

Zola shows the power of the human psyche and spirit. Despite the family's dramatic loss of wealth with their animals drowned and their crops damaged, they still have hope and consolation by thoughts of survival, starting all over again and making up for their losses. Roubien says, "Money is nothing." (Zola, 2000) The speaker utters this statement at a desperate moment when loss of money means nothing compared with losses of human lives which are irrevocable. Looking at the bright side of what man has and appreciating it are significant elements

that can provide hope to move forward. Zola's characters seem to have this hope which motivates them to keep fighting unflinchingly till the last breath of their lives. The body of Cyprien who is struggling for his life in the midst of waves and debris of damaged items appears like "something living making superhuman efforts" (Ibid). The power of waves and the danger of debris make survival seem impossible. Cyprien tries the impossible although it requires extraordinary skills and entails high risks. Similarly Gaspard, Pierre and Jacques show phenomenal courage, perseverance and stamina in their attempts to help their family. Howells acclaims Zola's veracious and epical characterization as well as memorable characters who "live in the memory as entirely as any people who have ever lived" (2000). What Roubien refers to as a "drill between three men and a river" (Zola, 2000) expresses remarkable heroic efforts made by Gaspard, Jacques and Pierre.

The horror of certain scenes makes women bury "their faces in their clasped hands" (Ibid). This happens when they realize that Cyprien is stuck in the debris and almost drowned by the rising water. The scene makes men feel helpless. Roubien says, "we, ourselves, fell to our knees, our arms outstretched, weeping, stammering supplications" (Ibid). After that they sink into a hopeless stupor and consequently lose sense of time.

Their desperate need for help makes some characters experience some hallucinations which are "false perceptions that appear to be real, as when, for example, a man dying of thirst in a desert thinks that he sees a lake" (*The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 2005). At a certain point, Gaspard draws attention to a boat approaching them. Then the rest of surviving characters see it. Roubien says "it was proceeding slowly and seemed to be circling about us without approaching" (Zola, 2000). Uncertainty is clear in his question: "Was it really a boat? I do not know to this day. When it disappeared it carried our last hope" (Ibid). Since a boat is all they need, it is likely that their disturbed minds start to create the illusion of a boat coming around without really reaching them.

The tragedy intensifies with the death of more family members. Pierre decides to leave the roof to leave enough space for the others. So he enters the water and gets drowned without resistance. As for Gaspard and Veronique, they die when they are about to reach the church. They are hit by beams dashed by flood water. The shock makes Marie and Roubien laugh. Marie also seems to be hallucinating as she cries and seems to answer someone calling her. Seriously affected by the unbearable psychological and mental pain she goes through, she leaves the roof and gets engulfed by the water. The narrator's shock can be discerned in his abnormal laughing, smiling and losing consciousness. To his big disappointment, he recovers consciousness later on to find himself the only survivor of the whole family.

## 5. STYLISTIC FEATURES OF “THE FLOOD”

Different stylistic features figure in Zola’s portrayal of dramatic action. As a naturalist writer, Zola objectively presents his characters, subject matter, setting and other elements of fiction. In addition, literary contrasts reflect Zola’s skill in combining different features and states in a way that gives strong impressions attracting readers’ attention and leaving unforgettable marks. Furthermore, vivid imagination permeates his work. Imagery including metaphors, personification, and similes imbues the text with elaborate shades of meanings enhancing awareness of the kind of life and messages suggested by the author.

### 5.1 Documentary Relation

In his documentary style, Zola’s narrator makes ample use of numbers describing himself, his village, family members, time, animals, measurements as well as other notions and items. According to Rahv (2004, p.43), “This quasi-scientific approach not only permits but, in theory at least, actually prescribes a neutral attitude in the sphere of values”. In other words, the story presents human experience as it appears to its author with neither idealization nor belittlement. This neutrality reflects a general trend in naturalists’ writings, including Zola’s, which is not in favor of romanticists’ focus on imagination. Related to this point, Marriott (2002, p.12) explains, “For Zola, observation of the human condition was a pre-requisite for meaningful literature and imagination was counter-productive”. Thus, naturalists give priority to the tangible over the abstract. Characters’ inner selves can be perceived in relating their words and observable behavior rather than overtly describing their feelings and thoughts. Referring to Zola’s fiction, Codsí (2015, p.38) states that “It is documentary, because through the narrator the reader is given a representation of the nineteenth century ‘decadent’ period in which Zola lived”. In “The Flood,” character’s optimism, care, compassion, and willingness to help others appear in activities like telling stories, inventing games, and playing cards. Likewise, emotional setting is presented indirectly via dialogue and character’s perceptible responses and deeds. Interaction between Roubien and his grandchildren can best be discerned in “Grandpa, give us more bread! A big piece grandpa!” (Zola, 2000). The repetition of the request and the word “Grandpa” reflects a friendly air and a high level of closeness among family members of ages ranging between 70 years and 2 years old. It is noteworthy that no generation gap creates communication problems.

Referring to events recorded in photos is another aspect of objective development of the story plot. Documenting the tragic end of Veronica and Gaspard’s wedding arrangements, Roubien says, “Only, they had the forethought to photograph the unidentified. And it

was among these lamentable photographs that I found Gaspard and Veronique” (Ibid). Readers here have an idea about the chaos and loss of dead bodies in the aftermath of the flood. At the same time, one notices man’s power and attempts to reduce the consequences of this chaos and sense of loss by photographing some dead bodies to enable surviving relatives to identify them.

This methodic presentation comes as no surprise from a writer seeking objective realistic portrayal of human experience. This focus on objectivity can make naturalistic writings clear and closer to documentary reports than fiction. Consequently, a naturalistic text tends to have a feel of authenticity and credibility arousing readers’ interest.

### 5.2 Literary Contrasts

Certain contrasts appear as character’s life changes dramatically when the flood suddenly strikes and puts an end to a state bliss and satisfaction achieved after long years of hard work. Realizing this tragic shift illuminates readers and develops their awareness of the kind of life of Zola sheds light. Contrasts also help create an emotionally engaging content triggering feelings of hope, fear, sympathy, empathy, disappointment, anger...etc. The importance of arousing emotions has been highlighted by researchers in the field of psychology. It is said that “Great art, music, and literature deal on a fundamental level with arousing emotions” (Human Diseases and Conditions, 2017). This viewpoint confirms the significance of literary contrasts in fiction. Defining contrast gives an idea about its nature and function. According to Holman and Harmon (1980) a contrast is

A rhetorical device by which one element (idea or object) is thrown into opposition to another for the sake of emphasis or clarity. The effect of the device is to make both contrasted ideas clearer than either would have been if described by itself. (p.100)

Juxtapositions and stark shifts in perspective to consolidate the structure of a literary work and effectively contribute to its mood and messages. Thus, combining contrasting elements creates a striking unexpectedness that is not easy to forget.

Examples of contrasts in “The Flood” include the timing of the natural disaster. It strikes while the family is enjoying their time making arrangements for a wedding. A wedding entails joy, hope, new life, peace and love while river flooding brings fear, damage, loss and death. It is also noticed that the flood happens at a time of prosperity wherein the family feels happy, proud, safe and grateful to God for his support and generosity. The devastation the flood causes robs the family of such positive feelings, kills their animals, destroys their fields, and finally takes their lives. It just leaves one member to tell the horror, pain and disappointment he has gone through. With the loss of his money and family, his survival brings him no happiness. The loneliness and misery he feels make him prefer death to life.

Some contrasts can also be noticed in roles assigned to men and women as well as in references to village houses and buildings. While men do their best to take action or find a way to face death, women's role is limited to calming each other down and showing concern about the children and servants. When they get up on the roof, "the women, silent and shivering, hid their faces to shut out the sight" (Zola, 2000). Sometimes they sob, and their sobs seem to irritate the others and push them to do something rather than wait for death to claim their lives. In fact, men make heroic efforts to help the family survive, but, unfortunately all their efforts go in vain. More contrasts reflect the difference between the fragile structures of houses in the village and that of the Church, the only building not damaged by the flood. Details indicate that one of the houses collapses because of its fragile structure as it was originally intended to be a factory.

Family's connections to land are totally disrupted by the flood. From the beginning, readers realize that the prosperity of Roubien's family comes from tilling their land, growing crops and raising cattle. Such connections abruptly vanish; while seeking refuge on the top of their house, Roubien says: "It was as if we were abandoned, shipwrecked, a thousand miles from land" (Ibid). Indeed, surrounded by water on all directions, they feel stranded far away from home although they are on the roof of their own house and in their own village. It is striking that they feel isolated from the world although they can see the church and hear the voices of people inside it. Other features reflect further contrasts. Family's loss of crops and cattle means poverty and hard life. However, Roubien's remark that "money is nothing" (Ibid) indicates that loss of property is insignificant compared with the loss of human lives.

Zola draws connections between human beings and animals in different situations. These connections can be attributed to the influence of Darwinism on Zola. Morales (2014, p.9) explains "darwin elaborated his theories from a scientific perspective and Emile Zola (1840-1902), the naturalist author par excellence, was the one who used his theories for writing giving them a literary approach". Illustrations of this point in "The Flood" include characters' crawling on hands and knees and climbing a wall like a cat to reach a safe place. Moreover, while her husband is struggling for his life, Aimee, "emitted without cessation a lamentable sound like the howling of a dog" (Zola, 2000). Referring to his condition after losing all his family, Roubien says, "I had but the instinct of the animal looking out for its own safety" (Ibid). Due to environmental factors, the speaker feels as if he has been reduced to an animal desperately at bay. Reiterating what Balzac says in the introduction to his *Comédie Humaine*, Rahv explains, "to the naturalist, human behavior is a function of its social environment; the individual is the live register of its qualities; he exists in it as animals exist in nature" (1949/2004, p.42). Despite such connections,

certain contrasts appear. For instance, animals' behavior in times of danger is completely different from that of the family's. Animals' limited potential and narrow space are easily discerned as all that animals could do was "killing each other in the barn" and getting out of the barn to get drowned by the relentless force of water. The scene of their drowning evokes sorrow and sympathy with details about the death of living creatures. Death of family's cattle also means loss of fortune as these animals constitute a farmer's source of income and earning living.

Contrary to the aggressive behavior among animals themselves and the way they easily get carried away by flood water, humans behave in a totally different manner. For hours, different characters show resourcefulness, sacrifice and heroic resistance to keep the whole family together. When they manage to make a raft, none of them objected to save Amie who is stuck on one of the nearby roofs. This consensus is an evident sign of family unity. This attitude shows at a time when saving Amie means a possible sacrifice of the lives of the eight surviving members up to that point.

### 5.3 Imagery

According to Abrams and Harpham, imagery "is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the vehicles (the secondary references) of its similes and metaphors" (2008, p.151). Imagery or "'images' taken collectively" (Ibid) suggests conveying experiences, states, scenes and notions by means of establishing connections with other entities to create vivid associations. Imagery usually includes material appealing to the senses. Imagery helps make abstractions more accessible by relating them in terms of tangible modes (Ibid, p.150). In "The Flood", adherence to objective narration does not keep Zola from using highly emotive language including imagery. Strong feelings and metaphor show in "Oh! The good days! Our farm sang from every corner" (Zola, 2000). The metaphor suggests the relationship between man and land. His achievement as a prosperous farmer makes Roubien perceive his farm as a living creature making merry melodies. Zola also employs language suggesting that the value of things is decided by human feelings and attitudes towards such things. This is clearly shown in the narrator's reference to the sun in "the sun was our brother, and I never recall a bad crop" (Ibid). Here, an awareness of the vital role sunshine plays in the good growth of crops makes the narrator consider the sun as a family member. Thus, the sun is personified or metaphorically described to indicate its special value.

Imbuing space with human or living traits blurs the boundaries between animate and inanimate entities. This technique conveys aspects of man's relationship with the surrounding environment. The speaker does not stick to

a strictly objective account of the place around him. He never conceives his farmhouse as a mere lifeless physical structure. It is more like a human being or living creature sharing the happiness of its residents. Ironically, this close relationship could be a reason for not taking necessary precautions to deal with possible natural catastrophes. The family never seems to have considered the possibility of leaving their village.

Other metaphors portray conditions, characters and setting. Rain water that results in prosperous farming season is described as “silver showered” (Ibid). The metaphor shows the wealth resulting from having rain water. It also confirms the gratitude the family feels towards God who has brought this rain or “silver.” Family’s wealth comes from other sources, its members. Gaspard has “a heart of gold” (Ibid). Money is not the sole reason for their happiness which also comes from the love, courage, and sacrifice demonstrated by characters like Gaspard. Other metaphors suggest a good mood that makes a character have a “thundering appetite” (Ibid). Descriptions of setting and plot further convey family’s joy. Happiness connected with Veronica’s wedding “seemed to bring a corner of Paradise to our table” (Ibid). Such metaphors richly express family’s blessings and merriment.

Family’s fear, confusion, and disappointment finds expression in other imaginative portrayals. The danger posed by the flood makes the narrator refer to it as a criminal or animal at large in “I heard behind me the roaring of the escaped river” (Ibid). Another metaphor shows nature as a deceptive creature as it is not always easy to predict the progress nor the outcome of natural phenomenon. What might seem hazardous at a certain point can turn out unthreatening later on. Roubien’s remark that, “the river puts up her back as if she were furious, and she calms down in a night” (Ibid) illustrates this point. Roubien’s disappointment is clear as he refers to the sun as a liar in “the sun lied when he sank, so sweet and calm, in the midst of the evening’s serenity” (Ibid). Character mood swings can be noticed when considering the shift in the attitude towards objects around them.

Similes also contribute to the story’s vivid imagery. The power of flood water is expressed in the way it carried and drowned animals. For example, “the sheep were tossed about like dead leaves” (Ibid). The image of coffin can be discerned in comparing the sky to “a white cloth” wrapping the world in “the pale sky looked like a white cloth thrown over the earth” (Ibid). In place of the bliss that seems to come to them from above, they seem to have a coffin thrown at them instead. Animal imagery is used in simile signifying danger. Waves attacking the village are compared to “a pack of gray beasts speckled with yellow” (Ibid). Furthermore, the items carried and tossed by the flood become like a “battering ram” (Ibid) breaking down their doors. More similes appear in “We

were whirled round like a leaf,” and “heavy carts were carried away like straws” (Ibid).

Thus, Zola’s vivid imagination pervades his fictional representations despite his focus on objective modes of expression. According to Howells, Zola “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” (2000).

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## CONCLUSION

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With a selection of characters ranging from a seventy year old great grandfather to a few months old great grandson, Zola’s “The Flood” carefully relates human fallibility before unpredictable nature. The affinity between man and the surrounding environment is insightfully illustrated via the life and experiences of the narrator and his extended family. After long years of hard work as a farmer, he becomes rich and starts to feel lucky and secure. God and nature appear as good relations. Great satisfaction with this success makes the family strongly united. Living together in the same house never causes any problems despite age differences among them. However, their state of bliss is shattered by the flooding of the nearby river. Sorrow and sympathy mount as the disaster strikes while they are enjoying their time and making arrangements for a wedding. A few hours of rising water put the characters in a psychological impasse. Their anxiety, fear, silence, anger, helplessness and confusion show their unbearable psychological pain. Despite heroic attempts made throughout an extremely desperate time, humans appear as losers. Different stylistic features including matter of fact relation, literary contrasts and imagery convey the tragedy. However, it is true that nature can destroy people’s property and even take their lives, but it does not break their spirit as human struggle continues honorably till the last moment.

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