

“Wait for it...” : Narrative Techniques of Suspense and the Experiment in Zola’s *La Bête humaine*

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RÉSUMÉ

À la fin du XIXe siècle, les critiques ont eu beaucoup de difficulté à faire "parler" l'œuvre d'Émile Zola, et donc le naturalisme. Pour les critiques qui décident de citer l'œuvre de Zola, laquelle expose des "péchés" tels que la prostitution, l'alcoolisme et la violence, cela signifie qu'ils prennent part eux aussi à la diffusion de contenus répréhensibles, voire pornographiques. Le dix-septième volet du cycle des Rougon-Macquart, *La Bête humaine* (1890), contient en effet des représentations graphiques de meurtres et de massacres. Cet article explore l'intersection de ce roman avec le genre de la fiction policière, en soutenant que le roman encode stratégiquement les structures de la fiction policière qui soulignent les objectifs du naturalisme et du roman expérimental. Non seulement ce genre permet à Zola de dépeindre thématiquement les aspects peu ragoûtants du naturalisme dans un cadre générique acceptable, mais les structures et les stratégies de la fiction policière sont également particulièrement adaptées au projet de Zola pour la fin du XIXe siècle, qui se déploie dans l'espace ambigu entre la théorie et la fiction. En outre, je suggère que la lecture du roman à travers le prisme de la fiction policière souligne la nature contemplative du projet de Zola.

ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century, critics had an exceptionally difficult time making Émile Zola's work, and thus naturalism, "speak."¹ For the critic deciding to cite Zola's œuvre, which exposed "sins" such as prostitution, alcoholism, and violence, this meant implicating oneself in the dissemination of objectionable content, even pornographic material.² The seventeenth installment in the Rougon-Macquart cycle, *La Bête humaine* (1890), indeed contains graphic representations of murder and mayhem. This article explores the intersection of this novel with the genre of detective fiction, arguing that the novel strategically encodes the structures of detective fiction that highlight the aims of naturalism and the experimental novel. Not only does this genre allow Zola to portray thematically the unsavory aspects of naturalism within an acceptable generic package, its structures and strategies are also uniquely suited to engage with Zola's late nineteenth-century project that unfurls in the ambiguous space between theory and fiction. Further, I suggest that reading the novel through the lens of detective fiction underlines the contemplative nature of Zola's project.

¹ The notion of making naturalism "speak" refers to the contemporary critic's task of meaning-making, or of generating a critical discourse around naturalism.

² Pascaline Hamon, "Contre Zola: Du charivari au... silence calculé," in *Émile Zola et le naturalisme, en tous genres: Mélanges offerts à Alain Pagès*, dir. Olivier Lumbroso, Jean-Sébastien Macke, Jean-Michel Pottier (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2019) 213-22. 214.

The seventeenth installment in the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, *La Bête humaine* (1890), traces the story of a descendant on the Macquart side of the family, Jacques Lantier. Though still firmly entrenched in the ideologies and aims of naturalism, this tale of murder and mayhem fits perfectly within the genre of detective fiction. In fact, the text strategically encodes elements of the typologies of detective fiction which highlight the aims of naturalism and the experimental novel, as Zola has outlined them in *Le Roman expérimental* (1880). By tracing the techniques at work on the surface and in the structure of the narrative, particularly those that privilege suspense, I will demonstrate how the essential techniques of detective fiction, notably of the thriller, foreground the concept of the experiment, and thus ultimately bolster the aims of the experimental novel.³

After examining the dualities inherent in detective fiction and their iterations within the novel, I will study the techniques of shifting focalizers⁴ and the variation of narrative tempo surrounding the events of Grandmorin’s murder. These structures of disruption and reprisal cultivate suspense, which generates interest in discovering the effects of a given cause. Finally, it is Lantier’s hybrid role as the tripartite detective figure – at once the detective, the criminal, and the victim – which privileges suspense and invokes the themes highly valued by the scientists employing the experimental method whose aims are both to investigate criminality, among other phenomena, and to master nature.

In the late nineteenth century, critics found it exceptionally difficult to make Émile Zola’s work, and thus naturalism, “speak.” In their reviews, critics implicated themselves in the dissemination of unsavory, even pornographic material if they chose to cite Zola’s œuvre, which exposed socially unacceptable behaviors such as prostitution, alcoholism, and violence.⁵ For this reason, one critic suggested, in 1880, that Zola “est devenu son propre critique.”⁶ Not only does the genre of detective fiction allow Zola to portray thematically the objectionable aspects of naturalism within an acceptable generic package, but its structures and strategies are also uniquely suited to engaging with that ambiguous space between theory and fiction. Zola artfully defers close scrutiny of the experimental novel’s potential contribution by effectively declaring, in *Le Roman expérimental*, as Alain Pagès puts it, that “[l]es faits parlent d’eux-mêmes”;⁷ it follows that his strategic encoding of the genre of detective fiction in *La Bête humaine* allows him to produce a work that is both creative and theoretical, exploratory yet decisive. I suggest then that *La Bête humaine* is cleverly constructed, marked by an exceptional capacity to “speak” for itself, and thus reveals a more introspective aspect to naturalism than its aim to represent “une tranche de vie” would first imply.⁸

In his “Typology of Detective Fiction [1966],” Tzvetan Todorov first establishes the dualities present within the genre. He explains that detective fiction is always comprised of two stories: that of the crime (or murder) and that of the investigation.⁹ The way each of these stories

³ Some identify the experimental value of Zola’s œuvre in his immense *Dossiers préparatoires*. On this point, see Olivier Lumbroso, “The Novel of the Writer’s Training: The Case of Zola,” *Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France* 3 (2020): 685-99. 698.

⁴ A focalizer is the “lens” or “point of view of a particular character” through which the story is told. Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, tr. Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (London/New York: Routledge, 2009) 36.

⁵ Hamon 214.

⁶ Qtd. in Hamon 215.

⁷ Alain Pagès, “En partant de la théorie du roman expérimental,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 47 (1974): 70-87.78.

⁸ This expression was “first used in connection with the writings of the naturalists.” G. I. Dale, “‘Une Tranche de Vie,’” *Modern Language Notes* 50.4 (1935): 265-66. 266.

⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction [1966],” in *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov, tr. Richard Howard [Foreword by Jonathan Culler] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) 44.

is privileged is a key feature which distinguishes the various typologies of detective fiction, each of which encodes different elements of the genre.¹⁰ The present study is limited to the narrative representation of the murder of Grandmorin in what would become known by the press as “l’affaire Grandmorin”¹¹ as its investigation unfolds. I posit this as the first story, or the story of the crime. The investigation manifests in multiple iterations, including in Lantier’s experience of witnessing the murder and its reprisal in chapter four with the official investigation by Denizet. This is the information pertaining to the first murder and it contributes to the account of the investigation, or the second story.

Though the present work focuses on techniques of suspense in the thriller, it is no surprise, given the complexities at work within the genre, that Zola’s text encodes different features of each of Todorov’s typologies. For example, the “classic whodunit” typology requires that “the crime [be] the story of an absence” and consequently that the second story “serve [] only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime.”¹² Although chapter one follows the events of Séverine and Roubaud that preface the murder of Grandmorin, the murder itself is indeed absent. The narration at the end of chapter one, which features Séverine and Roubaud as alternating focalizers, cuts away before approaching the event of the murder. Roubaud as the focalizer gives way to the general, with the subject pronoun “on” (*LBH* 72), in the final paragraphs of the chapter, signaling the changing perspective that is no longer connected to Roubaud’s perception, for example: “On partait. [...]. On ne voyait de lui [le train] [...] que les trois feux de l’arrière, le triangle rouge. Quelques secondes encore, on put le suivre [...]” (*LBH* 72). Next, chapter two introduces the character of Jacques Lantier who serves as the focalizer. As such, the actual event of the murder only appears in the narrative discourse¹³ through Lantier’s experience of the brief flash of the train going by.¹⁴ The story of the crime, then, is not immediately present – it is only witnessed as a vague flash. Whatever further details are provided about what has taken place on the train are still only ever reconstructions, inevitably belated. Indeed, the account of the crime thus constitutes the story of an absence.¹⁵

While the depiction of Grandmorin’s murder is absent from the narrative discourse, thus encoding an element of the “whodunit” typology, its account equally encodes elements of the thriller. By making the story of the crime the story of an absence, Zola suppresses the first story and privileges the second within the text. This is the first characteristic of the thriller, according to Todorov.¹⁶ He explains that the text of the thriller is not interested in “a crime committed anterior to the moment of the narrative”; instead, “the narrative coincides with the action.”¹⁷ Here, the story of Grandmorin’s murder coincides quite explicitly with the central action of the novel.

¹⁰ Todorov 48.

¹¹ Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) 149. Henceforth, references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text, with the indication *LBH* and a page number.

¹² Todorov 46.

¹³ I use the term “discourse” to emphasize “the expression plane of narrative as opposed to its content plane or story; the ‘how’ of a narrative as opposed to its ‘what’; the narrating as opposed to the narrated.” Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* [Revised edition] (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) 21.

¹⁴ As a focalizer, Lantier is fallible and has a limited view of the events (Fludernik 28). Stanzel’s theory also calls this a “reflector figure”; speaking of the events Fludernik explains that “they reflect the story to the reader rather than telling it to them as a narrator persona would.” Fludernik 36.

¹⁵ This crime is the story of an absence on a metaphorical level as well: the absence of Roubaud’s masculine potency. In a jealous rage, he attacks Séverine and then plots Grandmorin’s demise, symbolically re-legitimizing his own claim to masculinity, which was threatened by Séverine’s confession.

¹⁶ Todorov 47.

¹⁷ Todorov 47.

Although the focalizer is not chosen to foreground the literal depiction of the crime, the brief visual flash of the event caught by Lantier in chapter two does foreground this first story in relationship to the events of the narrative; and it is his uncertain witnessing of this very crime which serves as a trigger for the unfolding of the story. In this sense, the murder of Grandmorin is indeed present within the narrative.

Furthermore, the plot of *La Bête humaine* plays on the duality inherent in detective fiction: the story of the crime and the story of its investigation. Another way to consider this situation is as the story of two separate murders. Todorov avers that detective fiction is always the story of two murders:¹⁸ firstly, the story of the murder in question, carried out by the murderer who commits the deed; and secondly, that of the murder of the murderer, carried out by the detective who hunts down the killer to be brought to justice. Séverine and Roubaud come under suspicion in the murder of Grandmorin; the truth of the matter is eventually discovered by Lantier. In a twist of Todorov’s insight, Zola transforms the second murder from metaphorical to literal: Lantier does not kill by revealing the truth, but instead by his (failed) attempt on Roubaud’s life and by his (successful) strike against Séverine. More than simply uncovering the truth of the first crime of “l’affaire Grandmorin,” thereby metaphorically murdering the culprits, Lantier carries out this second story through a literal, physical annihilation of the original criminal(s). This is merely one way *La Bête humaine* engages with the structures at work in detective fiction.

The fact that *La Bête humaine* exists ambiguously between the “whodunit” and the thriller demonstrates the multiple outcomes at play in Zola’s experiment. Indeed, the author disturbs the duality between the first and second stories – the story of the crime and of its investigation – and shifts the story of the investigation from a metaphorical to a literal murder. As such, this shift indicates the presence of an underlying and complimentary experiment, quietly undertaken within the genre of detective fiction.

In his article “The Unseen Seer, or Proteus in the City: Aspects of a Nineteenth-Century Parisian Myth,” Richard Burton suggests that “Plots and plotting are the common pursuit of criminal and novelist alike,”¹⁹ thereby establishing a connection between literature and criminality. While it is not the experimental novelist to which he refers, his statement nevertheless highlights an intriguing commonality between the experimental novel and detective fiction. Indeed, the structure of the thriller favors what is also integral to the unfolding of Zola’s experimental novel: the plot.

If the text is the experimental novel, then the plot is the narrative space favorable to the execution of the experiment. In *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola equates the appearance of the experimentalist and subsequent launch of the experiment to “[faire] mouvoir les personnages dans une histoire particulière.”²⁰ That said, the suppression of the first story (the murder of Grandmorin) in favor of the second (its investigation) allows the plot strands²¹ in the narrative (the experiment) to unfold. The murder of Grandmorin effectively triggers the second story, setting Lantier and Séverine on a collision course which will provide the impetus for train disasters and additional murders: prime conditions for the study of human behavior. Furthermore, Todorov explains that in the thriller “the narrative coincides with the action.”²² This strategy favors the

¹⁸ Todorov 44-45.

¹⁹ Richard D.E. Burton, “The Unseen Seer, or Proteus in the City: Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Parisian Myth,” *French Studies* 42.1 (1988):50-68. 53.

²⁰ Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* [nouvelle éd.], éd. Eugène Fasquelle (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1909) 4-53.7. Referred to hereafter as *RE*.

²¹ “The ways in which the various strands of a plot converge or diverge.” Fludernik 30.

²² Todorov 47.

unfolding of the experiment within the text. The narrative must coincide with the action, because the narrative *is* the experiment. In short, the structure of the thriller – in this case, the stories made prominent in the text – privileges the plot, where the experiment takes place within the structure of the experimental novel.²³ By highlighting the second story in which the plot unfolds, the thriller foregrounds the core of the experimental novel itself.

In the first volume of *Les Cahiers naturalistes*, one critic remarks, “Dans *La Bête humaine* il n’y a que destruction – mais déjà on voit par cette négation même percer les possibilités pour un nouveau monde.”²⁴ Indeed, the last breath taken by any given character or the wholesale destruction caused by any given disaster – mechanical or otherwise – might either one or both give way to new possibilities within Zola’s experimental novel. Thanks to the structure of the thriller, “prospection takes the place of retrospection.”²⁵ Thematically and theoretically, this is in line with the nature of the experimenter’s task. In *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola writes, quoting Claude Bernard, that the experimentalist “emploie les procédés d’investigation simples et complexes pour faire varier ou modifier, dans un but quelconque, les phénomènes naturels et les faire apparaître dans des circonstances ou dans des conditions dans lesquelles la nature ne les présentait pas” (RE 5). In short, the experimenter employs a forward-oriented mindset, focused on the effects of a particular process or method similar to that of the thriller, which privileges the second story of the investigation. Moreover, Zola’s far-reaching goals for the experimental novel, such as to become “les maîtres des phénomènes [...] pour pouvoir les diriger” (RE 23-24) and “régler la vie [et] régler la société” (RE 24), further denote a discourse oriented towards the future. It is appropriate, then, that the structure of the thriller should favor prospection, and that Zola should usefully turn the structures of this particular genre to his own experimental ends.

Since the thriller foregrounds prospection instead of retrospection, the interest lies not in uncovering a mystery, but in creating either curiosity or suspense.²⁶ Proceeding from effect to cause generates curiosity.²⁷ This is not the primary interest found in *La Bête humaine*, however, which foregrounds the second story. Undoubtedly, the causes are already all too apparent in the experimental novel: *la race*, *le milieu* and *le moment* – the tripartite pillars of naturalism. Within the thriller, curiosity is effaced in the wake of determinism. Instead, I posit that suspense is the form of interest privileged in the experimental novel. Contrary to curiosity, suspense is cultivated when moving from cause to effect.²⁸ Todorov claims that interest “is sustained by the expectation of what will happen, that is, certain effects (corpses, crimes, fights).”²⁹ The anticipation of witnessing affirms the narrative, much like the experimenter, as forward-oriented. Just as readers are concerned with the results of the investigation (the second story) in the thriller, the experimental novelist proceeds as with a mind to results and their potential application to society.

The basic story line of *La Bête humaine* is inherently dynamic in nature. The contradictions and oppositions³⁰ around which it takes shape have produced many a rich reading, notably on the

²³ On repetition and free indirect discourse in the experimental novel, see Pagès 82-87.

²⁴ Antoinette Habich-Jagmetti, “Zola et ‘La Bête Humaine,’” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 1.4 (1955): 197-98 198.

²⁵ Todorov 47.

²⁶ Todorov 47.

²⁷ Todorov 47.

²⁸ Todorov 47.

²⁹ Todorov 47.

³⁰ These contradictions in Zola’s novel have been discussed by critics Muriel Louâpre and Robert M. Viti: between open and closed spaces, see Louâpre, “Lignes de fuite. *La Bête humaine* évadée du naturalisme,” *Romantisme* 126. 4 (2004): 65-79; between “temporal order and disorder,” see Viti, “The Cave, the Clock and the Railway: Primitive and Modern Time in ‘*La Bête Humaine*,’” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 19.1 (1990): 110-21.114; between primitive

spatial-temporal aspects of the novel and these demand attention. Interestingly enough, Zola envisioned the text as “un roman du mouvement d’abord,”³¹ according to Louâtre. Critics have aptly identified the tension between movement and stillness as a reigning motif. Wetherill, for instance, notes that “[l]’interférence du dynamique et de l’immobile est un motif essentiel du roman.”³² To gain insight into this very tension, it is useful to consider briefly a basic mathematical principle: speed is equal to distance divided by time. The formula to calculate speed is the quintessential way to conceptualize the relationship between distance and time, or the space between movement and stillness (stillness being where speed is zero). Speed is both spatial and temporal; it must be defined in relation to both and cannot exist otherwise. Rather than a thematic reading of speed, I argue that Zola represents speed within the structure of *La Bête humaine* as he builds suspense through the strategic use of focalizers and narrative tempo. These disrupt and reprise threads within the story, creating an atmosphere of suspense in the text. Thus, speed is a structural strategy that underlies and, aptly, propels the narrative forward.

First, the use of multiple focalizers tells the story in gaps. Each focalizer, whether it be Lantier, Séverine, Flore, or another, has only a limited view of events happening in the story world. This narrative situation serves to maximize the tension between the first story (the crime of the murder of Grandmorin) and the second (the investigation), this latter beginning with Lantier’s flash view of the murder. By telling the story primarily through these focalizing figures, Zola prioritizes the power of sight. To see is to know. The frequent shifts in focalizers slowly build the reconstruction of events that were previously absent at the level of narrative discourse, thus mounting the reader’s anticipation to see their effects. Although Lantier’s view of the murder is only a flash – the key event which spurs numerous plot strands into existence and the primary example of this study –, another strategic shift in focalization occurs in chapter four following Denizet’s questioning of witnesses in “l’affaire Grandmorin.” When Denizet holds Lantier back for a final question, focalization shifts to Roubaud. From Roubaud’s limited perception, it is impossible to glean the conversation occurring between Lantier and Denizet. This is a high-stakes conversation, in which “un mot de ce garçon [Lantier] pouvait les perdre” (*LBH* 191-92). Since there is a cut to Roubaud as the focalizer here, all that can be known is what he experiences while waiting in the hallway. Suspense is built in anticipation of the effects of their conversation, which could irrevocably shape the course of the unfolding plot.

In addition, the narrative tempo³³ of the first murder facilitates the creation of suspense in the text. In the immediate lead-up to the flash view of the murder, the narrative tempo slows to become time-extending narration, or a “stretch.” The pace of the action occurring within the story seems to slow relative to its discourse time, which is stretched out. This technique often favors the portrayal of a character’s interiority.³⁴ In this instance, it generates an atmosphere of suspense as Lantier falls into deep contemplation, punctuated by the comings and goings of the trains through the tunnel, any one of which could be *the* train of Séverine and Roubaud’s departure in the first chapter.

and modern time, see Viti.

³¹ Louâtre 74.

³² Michael Wetherill, “Transgressions: Topographie et narration dans *La Bête humaine*,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 42.70 (1996): 67-82. 77.

³³ Genette defines narrative tempo by distinguishing between story time and discourse time. Story time is grounded in the events of the fictional (story) world, while discourse time refers to the duration of the actual narrative. These work together to establish the narrative tempo, or the period of time covered. See Fludernik 32.

³⁴ Fludernik 33.

As Lantier grapples with his nearly fatal encounter with Flore only moments earlier, he watches trains enter and leave the tunnel. The narrative tempo slows to a “stretch” while he considers his cursed heredity and his violent impulses. However, each of these ruminations is punctuated at the beginning of the paragraph by the concrete description of an event in the story world. For instance, before becoming lost in thoughts of those he has been tempted to kill, Lantier props himself up “sur un coude, réfléchissant, regardant l’entrée noire du tunnel” (*LBH* 100). The reflections that follow end with the transit of other trains: “Un train, de nouveau, passa avec l’éclair de ses feux, s’abîma en coup de foudre qui gronde et s’éteint, au fond du tunnel” (*LBH* 101). Finally, “[d]’un effort, Jacques tenta de se lever” (*LBH* 103), a gesture which indicates the end of the character’s internal reveries and signals an intent to act. While Lantier’s only actions are to sit, watch, and eventually move to get up, the stretched narration foregrounds the passage of the trains he observes.³⁵ More than simply bringing excitement to the scene with their movement,³⁶ each of these concrete descriptions of a train moving through the tunnel represents an event within the story time. They disrupt Lantier’s time-extending “stretch” of interiority, anchoring the narrative back within story time. This narrative technique consequently serves as a reminder of the events happening in the story world – that somewhere, on a given train, Séverine and Roubaud are plotting to kill. Thus the disruptive element of passing trains within the “stretch,” becomes even more noteworthy since one of them could be Séverine and Roubaud’s.³⁷ Just when the reader risks getting swept away in Lantier’s inner thoughts, Zola disrupts the “stretch” with the rapid movement of the train, a reminder of what is happening in the story world, creating both a sense of speed and suspense.

The “stretch” of Lantier’s inner reflections contrasts sharply with the speed at which he witnesses the murder occur in the passing train.³⁸ Time-extending narration is thus juxtaposed with another narrative tempo within the text: isochrony, or the situation when story time most closely resembles discourse time.³⁹ True isochrony, where the duration of the event within the story perfectly mirrors the duration of its representation within the narrative, is difficult to achieve⁴⁰ because it presupposes that linguistic processes and conceptions are manifested simultaneously with the eye’s perception.⁴¹ As he is the focalizer at this moment, Lantier’s perception of events is indeed limited. As such, the narrative description of the murder is extremely

³⁵ On the nocturnal landscape of this chapter as an enclosed space like a labyrinth, see Antoinette Jagmetti, *La Bête humaine d’Émile Zola. Étude de stylistique critique* (Genève: Droz, 1955). For more on labyrinths in this chapter, see Louâtre 66 and 76-77.

³⁶ On this point, see Jagmetti 73.

³⁷ The train as a structuring element that gestures to story time also has relevance on a second, thematic level: the train is a quintessential symbol of modernity, of industrial progress which plunges relentlessly forward, while serving simultaneously as a visual representation of linear time and progression.

³⁸ David F. Bell examines the cinematic aspects of this sequence in chapter two of his study dealing with speed and movement in nineteenth-century geographies. See Bell, *Real Time: Accelerating Narrative from Balzac to Zola* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2004).

³⁹ Fludernik 33.

⁴⁰ Fludernik 32.

⁴¹ In his analysis of speed and perception in relation to the machine, Olivier Lumbroso in *La Bête humaine: Chaos et création* suggests that isochrony characterizes chapter two as a whole. See Lumbroso, *La Bête humaine d’Émile Zola. Chaos et création* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2021) 85. However, Gérard Genette goes so far as to say, “it is hard to imagine the existence of a narrative that would admit of no variation in speed.” Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, tr. Jane E. Lewin [Foreword by Jonathan Culler] (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983) 88. The transposition of what Lantier witnessed as a metaphorical conception of a flash of lightning – “une apparition en coup de foudre” (*LBH* 105) – into language will always lag behind in relationship to the processing speed of the eye, which, in fact, perceived the crime “très distinctement” (*LBH* 105).

brief; in other words, discourse time approaches story time. This sequence begins by grounding Lantier within story time: “C’était l’express du Havre, parti de Paris à six heures trente, et qui passait là, à neuf heures vingt-cinq: un train que, de deux jours en deux jours, il conduisait” (*LBH* 104). The precision of the hour at that particular location renders the approach of this train – *his* train – easily identifiable. As he observes, “tout de suite les wagons se succédèrent, les petites vitres carrées des portières, violemment éclairées, firent défiler les compartiments pleins de voyageurs [...]” (*LBH* 105). It is this very recognition that serves as a primer for what is to come and will allow him to characterize his glimpse of the murder, though merely “une apparition en coup de foudre” (*LBH* 105), with a degree of precision.

In contrast, Lantier’s view of the murder through the rapidly passing window of the train occurs “dans un tel vertige de vitesse, que l’œil doutait ensuite des images entrevues” (*LBH* 105). Indeed, the actual description of the murder itself will only span a single sentence, accentuating the fact that Lantier’s view through the window occurs “à ce quart *précis* de seconde” (*LBH* 105, emphasis mine). Here the narrative discourse attempts to mirror the story, seeking to express directly, in simple terms and with precise diction, what is seen in this mere split second:

Jacques [...] aperçut, par les glaces flambantes d’un coupé, un homme qui en tenait un autre renversé sur la banquette et qui lui plantait un couteau dans la gorge, tandis qu’une masse noire, peut-être une troisième personne, peut-être un écroulement de bagages, pesait de tout son poids sur les jambes convulsives de l’assassiné. (*LBH* 105)

Much like the railway activity throughout the novel, discourse time is on a collision course with story time. The inclusion of “peut-être” echoes the presence of doubt associated with such a flash, yet still offers concrete possibilities for the forms that Lantier sees without devolving into extended speculation. The use of the conjunction “tandis que” emphasizes the simultaneity of the events occurring, and which Lantier’s eye is trying to process. Zola carefully shapes this brief description of Lantier’s glimpse of the murder within a single sentence, giving us a play-by-play account of the murder scene.

Lantier’s transient view of the murder as “une apparition en coup de foudre” pulls the narrative tempo of this moment towards isochrony, contrasting sharply with the previous time-extending narration of this scene which generates an air of suspense in the expectation of the reprisal of plot threads initiated by Séverine and Roubaud in chapter one. Moreover, the choice of Lantier as the focalizer ensures that the only literal representation of Grandmorin’s murder within the story is experienced as a gap. How will Lantier unravel these fleeting images and attempt to fill in the gaps of his vision? How will his brief glimpse of this absent, first story be reconstructed elsewhere within the text?⁴² To sum up, Zola’s orchestration of narrative tempo and his strategic use of Lantier as a focalizer builds the characteristic suspense of the thriller. In putting these techniques into play, Zola sustains interest that is rooted in anticipating effects, just as the experimental method’s intention is to produce results when applied to literature.

Dissecting the layers of Jacques Lantier holds a nearly irresistible draw. In “Lignes de fuite: *La Bête humaine* évadée du naturalisme,” Louâpre suggests that Lantier “porte la marque [...] de la genèse tortueuse du roman: roman du crime, roman judiciaire, roman ferroviaire.”⁴³ One might also consider this character alongside Richard Burton’s myth of the “criminal-detective-

⁴² Séverine contributes her reconstruction in chapter eight.

⁴³ Louâpre 67.

financier”⁴⁴ in the mid-to-late nineteenth-century cultural imagination.⁴⁵ Lantier is a character who evades classification by a single term or descriptor. In a similar vein, I suggest that the depiction of Lantier favors the characteristically ambiguous protagonist of the suspense novel,⁴⁶ who is positioned as detective, victim, and criminal⁴⁷ within the text. Lantier is constantly toggling between the three poles throughout the novel, sometimes even overlapping in complicated layers as he is pulled in opposite directions. This tripartite position generates suspense within the story as the reader anticipates the effects of this unstable role. In addition, it privileges what is at work in the experimental novel, for which an aim was to investigate and eventually solve the problem of criminality.⁴⁸

In a first instance, Lantier is positioned as a detective figure.⁴⁹ Following his glimpse of the murder, he must make a conjecture about what he has seen, logically assemble the facts, and then draw a conclusion. First, he interrogates what he saw: “Avait-il bien vu?” (*LBH* 105). He takes stock of the information at hand and considers several possibilities, concluding to the best of his ability that “[l]a masse brune devait être une couverture de voyage, tombée en travers du corps de la victime” (*LBH* 105). Finally, he decides that it must have been a hallucination, “née de l’affreuse crise qu’il venait de traverser” (*LBH* 106). By self-consciously questioning his own reliability as a witness, Lantier positions himself as a keen and measured detective figure in the moments following the murder.

His role as a detective does not end here, however. He is also key to the reconstruction of this crime within the legally-sanctioned realm of the courtroom at the Palais de Justice. Denizet, who is the focalizer for much of this chapter, would have Lantier embrace his role as star witness “étant l’unique témoin qui eût entrevu ce dernier [l’assassin]” (*LBH* 176). However, Lantier refuses, repeatedly protesting when pressed for details of the culprit’s identity that he has no answer: “Je ne sais pas, je ne peux pas dire... je vous assure, Monsieur, que je ne peux pas dire” (*LBH* 188). By resisting his own role as a key witness, Lantier hinders Denizet’s success in the courtroom, as the legally-sanctioned detective. Although Lantier obstinately refuses the witness role, his observations and reflections do not cease. In this way, he clings to his function as detective within his tripartite identity. He silently attempts to piece together the fleeting images in his mind’s eye. Then, he examines Roubaud from across the room: “Jacques rest[e] les yeux largement ouverts sur lui” (*LBH* 179); and he notices “certaines analogies entre Roubaud et l’assassin” (*LBH* 180), leading to his swift realization of Roubaud’s culpability. By chapter four, Lantier has successfully fulfilled his detective role in the murder of Grandmorin.

⁴⁴ Burton 62.

⁴⁵ Burton suggests that there is “a definite structural homology between the myths of conspiracy (criminal or other) [...], policeman or police force and all-seeing but invisible banker-financier.” Burton 63.

⁴⁶ Todorov 50.

⁴⁷ Todorov uses the terminology “culprit” where I have used the word “criminal.” Indeed, Lantier is not the culprit in the murder of Grandmorin, though he is certainly the culprit in the later murder of Séverine and exhibits criminal drives and behaviors throughout the story.

⁴⁸ In *Le Roman expérimental*, Zola reveals his aim to be “maître du bien et du mal” (*RE* 24) and “apporter surtout des bases solides à la justice en résolvant par l’expérience les questions de criminalité” (*RE* 24).

⁴⁹ Though I limit my analysis to the character of Lantier, other characters, like Flore and Séverine, are also positioned as a detective figures throughout the novel.

On a second level, Lantier’s position is that of the criminal.⁵⁰ While he is not the culprit of the first story (the murder of Grandmorin), he clearly straddles the role of criminal as the second story unfolds. His murderous attack on Flore, only narrowly avoided, disrupts his role as a level-headed detective. In an unsettling reversal, he now feels he is the subject of scrutiny from the passengers on the train, “comme si cette foule anonyme, indifférente et pressée, avait pu l’entendre, s’était redressé, refoulant ses sanglots, prenant une attitude d’innocent” (*LBH* 101). After Misard’s discovery of the body, Lantier follows closely behind, possessed by a physical compulsion to examine it, “une telle fièvre de voir, de savoir” (*LBH* 108). Yet his investigation is simply a guise that masks the compulsion to satisfy his own violent urges. The bloody scene is a spectacle, about which “l’horrible attrait [...] le retenait là” (*LBH* 109). Even more overcome by this experience, Lantier is left with one overwhelming thought: “[L]’autre, l’homme entrevu le couteau au poing, avait osé! L’autre était allé jusqu’au bout de son désir, l’autre avait tué!” (*LBH* 109). His close look at the the corpse quickly erodes his position as detective, replacing curiosity with admiration for the killer. Even more, this examination leaves him with an unsettling certainty: “Oui! Il oserait, il oserait à son tour!” (*LBH* 110). Such a disconcerting realization on the part of the character generates suspense in the reader, anticipating the outcome of such a claim – perhaps a fresh corpse, as Todorov suggests⁵¹ – and confronts the reader with an ominous question about Jacques Lantier: “Will he? Or won’t he?”⁵²

In addition, Lantier’s transition into the role of detective, after witnessing the murder, is disrupted by his distress over the conflict with Flore. However keen and self-conscious his investigations into the witnessing of the murder may have been, Lantier is compelled to dismiss this examination. No longer the careful detective, he veers back towards the criminal realm in which his well-reasoned vision must dissolve once again into a sort of feverish hallucination. By reprising this turbulent role, he once again self-indulgently yields to his perceived status as victim – a status which, ironically, he explores to a much greater extent than he investigates his sighting of an actual murder.

Indeed, Lantier’s role as a criminal is inextricably bound up with that of the victim. He frequently laments his cursed heredity, “cette fêlure héréditaire” (*LBH* 99), which drives his violent urges. He inevitably falls victim to his own atavistic impulses.⁵³ Not only is he subject to these personal desires, but also to the drives of his entire family: “[I]l en venait à penser qu’il payait pour les autres, les pères, les grands-pères, [...] un lent empoisonnement, une sauvagerie” (*LBH* 99). Kate Griffiths understands Lantier’s victim status as a “lack of criminal authorship” in which “the decision to murder [...] does not belong to Jacques.”⁵⁴ Without his own agency, Lantier can

⁵⁰ For a psychoanalytic analysis of Lantier, see Monique Fol, “Compulsion répétitive, rites et tabous: Jacques Lantier, Émile Zola dans *La Bête humaine*,” *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 37.65 (1991): 177-88. For nineteenth-century views of *La Bête humaine* and criminality, see Césaire Lombroso, “*La Bête humaine* et l’anthropologie criminelle,” *Revue des revues* 4/5 (1892): 260-64 (HM, IV, 1753) and Jules Héricourt, “*La Bête humaine* de M. Zola et la physiologie du criminel,” *Revue bleue* 4 (7 novembre 1890): 710-18 (HM, IV, 1752).

⁵¹ Todorov 47.

⁵² Here Lantier shares characteristics with Burton’s “Protean criminal” who is able to “espouse a multiplicity of selves, to pass as by metempsychosis from one identity to another.” Burton 52. Lantier flits between multiple roles. His initial role as detective – or “inspecteur,” to use Burton’s terminology – indeed “links up disconcertingly with the myth of the Protean criminal.” Burton 56.

⁵³ Martin Kanen notes the influence of Césaire Lombroso’s *L’Homme criminel* on the character of Lantier, remarking that Lombroso “drew many parallels between the born criminal and primitive man.” Kanen, *Zola’s La Bête Humaine: A Study in Literary Creation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962) 36.

⁵⁴ Kate Griffiths, “The Ghost of the Author: *La Bête Humaine* and the Pull of the Future,” chapter five in her monograph *Émile Zola and the Artistry of Adaptation* [1st ed.] (Boca Raton, FL: Routledge, 2009) 107-31. 108.

be nothing more than a victim of these drives. He feels physical and genuine despair over the thought of having almost killed his old friend Flore: “Ses doigts tordus entrèrent dans la terre, ses sanglots lui déchirèrent la gorge, dans un râle d’effroyable désespoir” (*LBH* 98). In short, his heredity deprives him of a certain agency and favors his descent into the role of victim.

Lantier is at once a detective, a criminal, and a victim, a multidimensional role which lends itself to the unpredictability of the thriller. Accordingly, this tripartite identity represents a triple threat: Lantier as detective, who threatens the culprit by investigating and revealing the truth; Lantier as criminal and potential culprit himself, who gives in to his violent impulses; and Lantier as victim of his geneology. To put it another way, he represents a destabilizing intersection of past, present, and future; a victim of his past and a detective figure in his present, Lantier fights an impulse against a potential criminal future. Time thus plays an essential role not only in relation to the story and discourse, but within Lantier as a character. In fact, this is where the experimental novel and detective fiction intersect strikingly. It is in Lantier’s tripartite position as detective-criminal-victim that the techniques at work in detective fiction coalesce with those of the experimental novel: the intersection of character and theme. According to Todorov, the thriller “has been constituted [...] around the milieu represented, around specific characters and behavior; in other words, its constitutive character is in its themes.”⁵⁵ Lantier’s tripartite identity foregrounds the effects of heredity and environment.⁵⁶ Not only is he emblematic of the effects of determinism, he is furthermore that eponymous human beast at the heart of which lie the secrets to investigating criminality and mastering good and evil. In other words, Lantier’s unstable position foregrounds the disconcerting existence of all possibilities, a strong starting point from which to study the effects of complicated, deterministic human drives which in turn augment the atmosphere of suspense in the novel.

If the strategies inherent in detective fiction foreground the experiment in order to bolster the aims of the experimental novel, as I have argued, it is because detective fiction is bound up with literary theory itself. In the introduction to their edited collection on detective fiction, entitled *The Cunning Craft*, Ronald Walker and June Frazer trace “the paradigmatic function that detective fiction continues to provide for criticism.”⁵⁷ Alluding to their title, they add that both “are manifestly cunning crafts.”⁵⁸ Indeed, to capitalize on this ambiguous space between theory and fiction would require a shrewd mind; Zola himself confesses that the experimental novel is just a method or tool, one which will achieve originality only in the hands of the right person.⁵⁹

Zola’s goals may at first be characterized as scientifically and outwardly motivated – in other words, as expressions of his desire to have a distinct impact within society. However, taking into account his use of the structures of detective fiction to work in tandem with the experimental method, we are bound to reconsider this characterization and recognize that his work may be equally introspective. In fact, Zola’s use of the strategies of detective fiction is indicative of a moment of high self-awareness, of Zola as observer, experimenter, and author. Thanks to the characteristic self-reflexivity of the genre, detective fiction becomes the emblematic toolkit for Zola’s experiment in *La Bête humaine* and allows him to renew focus on the nature and bounds of the experiment itself. Since Zola occupies the position of both creative and critical writer, he

⁵⁵ Todorov 48.

⁵⁶ For a topographical study of the text, see Wetherill.

⁵⁷ Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer, Introduction, *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. R. G. Walker and J. M. Frazer (Macomb: Western Illinois Univ., 1990) vi.

⁵⁸ Walker and Frazer vi.

⁵⁹ Zola remarks that “la méthode n’est qu’un outil; c’est l’ouvrier, c’est l’idée qu’il apporte qui fait le chef d’œuvre” (*RE* 32).

circumvents reproach for the novel’s graphic representation of egregious criminal activity. Furthermore, this case stands as an invitation to reconsider the aim of the experimental novel. Rather than mastering nature and solving the problem of criminality, perhaps the genre’s most prized ambition – deceptively simple yet equally ambitious – is to actualize the experimental novel itself. In other words, reading *La Bête humaine* through the lens of detective fiction reveals that naturalism’s socially conscious ambitions do not eclipse the experimental novel as a radical literary endeavor in the late nineteenth century.