



## L'Assommoir (The Dram Shop)

*Émile Zola , Robin Buss (Translator)*

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The seventh novel in the Rougon-Macquart cycle, *L'Assommoir* (1877) is the story of a woman's struggle for happiness in working-class Paris. At the center of the story stands Gervaise, who starts her own laundry and for a time makes a success of it. But her husband soon squanders her earnings in the Assommoir, a local drinking spot, and gradually the pair sink into poverty and squalor. *L'Assommoir* was a contemporary bestseller, outraged conservative critics, and launched a passionate debate about the legitimate scope of modern literature. This new translation captures not only the brutality but the pathos of its characters' lives.

## L'Assommoir (The Dram Shop) Details

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Author : Émile Zola , Robin Buss (Translator)

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## From Reader Review L'Assommoir (The Dram Shop) for online ebook

### Jenn(ifer) says

Okay, so I'm throwing in the towel. This book is probably on the precipice of greatness, but I just don't give a f\*ck. When you find yourself yawning through pages and pages of narration, skimming and sighing and rolling your eyes, it's time to cut the cord. It's not outside the realm of possibility that one day I'll find myself wanting to revisit Gervaise, maybe when I'm old and incontinent, biding my time in a nursing home waiting for death to take me. When I'm so bored of playing bingo and watching the grass grow that even Zola seems more appealing, maybe then I will decide to finish this book.

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### [P] says

I struggle with Emile Zola; I have, to use a vulgar phrase, beef with him. With *L'Assommoir*, as with almost all his novels, it was Zola's stated aim to show life as it really was. That - reality - is actually how he responded to criticism of this particular book. No, you cannot object to *L'Assommoir*, he said, because it is true, it is life! And, well, I call bullshit on that.

It has always amused me that readers often lambast Balzac for his generalisations, while praising Emile - an author whose *Les Rougon-Macquart* series of books are built on stereotypes and cliches and sweeping statements about entire classes of people - for his sensitivity and verisimilitude. Every character in *L'Assommoir* is negative in some way, is weak or a drunkard or a miser or brutal or slutty or stupid etc. Not one or two, but all. That is how he saw the Parisian working class, and the whole of the working class, in fact. And the thing is, he was in sympathy with them, he was saying that the conditions that they were forced to endure made them the way that they were, but it's the sort of patronising sympathy you might have for an animal that eats its own young. *Poor thing, it doesn't know any better*. In Zola's world, or imagination, the working class aren't people, they are mistreated animals with the potential to be people. That doesn't sit right with me. It's a horrible bourgeois attitude.

Moreover, Zola's determinism - the belief that social conditions create certain kinds of people, that they determine the course of their lives and their personalities[!] - has such negative consequences for his work, in terms of literary quality, because it ensures, makes necessary, paper-thin characterisation. Gervaise has no freedom, she is a slave to her circumstances, a slave to her impulses, and therefore the author need not, indeed cannot attempt to breath any life into her; he need not or cannot try and give us any sense of her motives or internal life, because she, essentially, has none - she simply does what she has to do, she walks the path that has already been mapped out for her. So, when Gervaise takes Coupeau, when she agrees to be his wife, there is no sense of her making a decision based on reasoning, she merely acts in accordance with her weak character as determined by her circumstances. I find that incredibly dreary, not only theoretically but as a reading experience.

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### Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

Arrogant 21st century reader, take hold of this book, more than a hundred years old, and suffer a humiliation

like I did. Sure, you have read all types, and there isn't a book of note that isn't in your library or kindle. You feel nothing can surprise you anymore. Plots are all predictably the same. A character is introduced and you know, more or less, what the author will do to him after a hundred or so pages. A character who is innately good, and who suffers a lot, will triumph in the end. Or if he must die tragically, someone will remember him by, or perpetuate his memory, like some descendants who narrate his story, or a diary that keeps him alive. The stuff bestsellers are made of, always with tacit invitation to be made into a movie and make their authors rich.

NOT THIS NOVEL though! Zola creates characters then let them do as they please. As I get introduced to the characters, I keep on rolling my eyes in disbelief with the very real, but un-novelistic, trajectories of their lives. Like as if Zola had pronounced that indeed life is stranger than fiction and so instead of creating a story in his mind, he just watches his neighbors surreptitiously then reports on their shenanigans like he's a war correspondent.

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## **Edward says**

*Introduction*

*Note on the Translation*

*Select Bibliography*

*A Chronology of Émile Zola*

*Maps*

--L'Assommoir

*Explanatory Notes*

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## **Rubi says**

Cuántos sentimientos encontrados con esta novela... Empecé con risas, alucinando con la frescura y la sinceridad de Zola. Poco a poco, al irse desarrollando la historia y al ir conociendo a los personajes más profundamente, he sentido tristeza, lástima, dolor, enfado, piedad, ternura, ganas de llorar...

Me ha fascinado, de principio a fin: no es la historia de una taberna, sino de todo un barrio parisino. Familia, celos, cuernos, lucha por salir adelante, nuevos comienzos e ilusiones... Muchos cotilleos y maldad (aunque también bondad). Violencia de género. Palizas que quedan en familia. Desgaste. Inmundicia. Suciedad. Orgullo perverso. Maléfica envidia. Odio y falsedad. Derroche de algunos y tacañería de otros... Hay hasta ménage à trois en este pedazo de libro; no le falta de nada.

Cómo se jode la vida la gente con el alcohol. Intentan ahogar las penas en el fondo del vaso y en realidad, no se dan cuenta de que éstas, mojadas, pesan más. Qué cantidad de cosas pierden por caer en este vicio tan insano: hasta el juicio y... se les escapa la vida gota a gota.

Gervasia, has hecho mella en mí. Nunca te olvidaré. He aprendido mucho con tus errores, pero también he crecido contigo en cada paso que has dado.

Zola, entiendo que las clases obreras se te echasen encima cuando salió publicada esta novela. Cuando no se tienen pelos en la lengua, los demás se hacen los ofendidos diciendo que todo son mentiras. Yo, sin embargo, te doy las gracias de corazón por haber escrito esto.

**"... se creía fuerte y quería vivir como mujer honrada, porque la honradez es la mitad de la dicha."**

**"Y con una pena intensa que le paralizaba el corazón, llegó al convencimiento de que ella jamás conocería la felicidad"** (Qué fácil es echarle la culpa a la vida, tachándola de injusta, quejarnos, y dejarnos llevar... La felicidad no se encuentra si no se lucha por ella con uñas y dientes.)

**"En las familias, sobre todo, cuando unos triunfan y brillan, los otros rabian de envidia. Pero es necesario disimular y no dar el espectáculo"**: Hasta en las mejores familias ocurre esto. Envidia encubierta y falsedad.

**"Como es natural, cuando se decae hasta el extremo, desaparece todo el orgullo de la mujer. Había perdido su antigua dignidad, sus coqueterías, sus necesidades de sentimientos, de conveniencias y de consideraciones."**

**"Reventó de embrutecimiento."**

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### **Jonathan says**

A masterpiece. Brutal, angry, funny, sad. The final chapter in particular is extraordinary for its time, and absolutely devastating. The way he deals with domestic abuse throughout the book is jaw dropingly modern.

I have not read enough Zola, I realise that now.

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### **Faith says**

This book (the French title is "L'Assommoir") is a depressing argument for sobriety. It's also a vivid slice of life in late 19th century Paris. Twenty-two year old Gervaise is deserted by her lover Lantier and left with two small sons. Supporting herself as a laundress, she soon marries Coupeau, a young tin worker, and they have a daughter Anna (or Nana, who later becomes the protagonist in the Zola book with that title). The couple get along well, are steadily employed and manage to save enough for Gervaise to start her own business. Then Coupeau has an accident and thereafter the family is mired in debt. However, the real problems begin when first Coupeau and then Gervaise start to drink.

Lantier also returns and soon enough Gervaise is supporting not only her drunken, unemployable husband but also Lantier, who has a real knack for latching on to women willing to be treated like doormats. I can think of only one man in the book who isn't cruel, brutish and/or drunk. Children are whipped and a wife is kicked to death by her husband. This is not a happy story and things do not turn out well for Gervaise, but it was a well written picture of poverty and despair. Unfortunately, I don't think the story was dated at all. I listened to the audiobook narrated by Frederick Davidson.

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## **Capsguy says**

There is no hope...

You thought you've read bleak, especially if you're acquainted with Zola, but until you read L'Assommoir you don't know anything. This hit me harder than The Book of Disquiet did by Pessoa.

No one is spared in this novel, those who escape death are left destitute or soulless. There is a glimmer of hope for some characters, but that's squashed if you're well acquainted with the Rougon-Macquart series, in which many characters in L'Assommoir have re-appearances, and certainly not joyful ones.

Destitution, greed, and solitude run rampant throughout this novel, set in the slums of Paris. The hopes of the reader slips and stumbles, ever downward as crushing social living standards with the poison of alcohol gear up and take countless victims. The most horrifying thing is that so much in the novel is still prevalent in first world nations. Domestic violence fuelled by substance addiction; women forced to sell their bodies for their next meal; people throwing away their entire livelihood and hopes for the future for the next drink hit. We've all seen and heard of it, with some of us unfortunately growing up around it.

The family institution always seems to be the most solid, unshakeable bond that holds us together. But look how easily that changes when some members of the family have a taste of success or dip below into poverty and addiction.

There is so much to discuss in this novel that would require hours of time to write up, and I don't have the stamina nor the eloquence to do so. This is not a book you want to look back and go: "That scene sure was memorable", Zola's ability to capture these soul-crushing realities impacts the reader profoundly.

I am a self-proclaimed reader of the bleak, I at times get a knack out of it, but the continuous darkness and lack of hope in this even got to me. However if you're looking into something similar to this, especially in terms of the family treatment of fallen relatives, I recommend The Death of Ivan Ilych by Tolstoy, The Metamorphosis by Kafka, and of course, more Zola.

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## **Mohammed Ali says**

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## Dagio\_maya says

***“Ma la verità era che moriva di miseria, di sudiciume; moriva per le fatiche della sua vita rovinata.”***

Pubblicato nel 1876, settimo del ciclo dei Rougon-Macquart. “L’Assomoir” è un termine argot dal doppio significato “bettola” e “mazzata”.

Nella traduzione italiana assume un suono assai sinistro: *L’Ammazzatoio* o, non da meno, *Lo Scannatoio*. Si potrebbe così pensare ad una cruda storia di assassinii ma, in realtà, la morte qui s’insinua in modo più subdolo.

Gervaise è alla finestra: anche stanotte il suo uomo è sparito per bettola.

Una leggera zoppia non le impedisce di essere bella ed attraente.

Ha solo ventidue anni ma Lantier le ha già “regalato” due figli. Dalla provincia sono arrivati pieni di speranze alla bella Parigi che si è dimostrata, invece, corruttrice.

Gervaise sarà dunque abbandonata e in questo quartiere di operai affacciandati si rimboccherà le mani riprendendo il suo lavoro di lavandaia. Con il tempo troverà un altro uomo, un operaio di nome Coupeau ed avrà un altro figlio, anzi una figlia: Anna detta Nanà.

Al centro di tutto:

*” ’Assomoir di papà Colombe si trovava all’angolo fra rue des Poissonniers e boulevard de Rochechouart. L’insegna portava da un capo all’altro e in lunghe lettere azzurre una sola parola: Distillazione. Sulla porta, in due mezzi fusti, si vedevano degli oleandri polverosi. L’enorme bancone s’allungava sulla sinistra di chi entrava, con le sue file di bicchieri, la fontana e i misurini di stagno, mentre la vasta sala tutt’attorno era adornata di grosse botti dipinte di giallo chiaro, luccicanti di vernice, con i cerchi e le cannele di rame risplendenti. Più in alto, su delle mensole, bottiglie di liquori, boccali di frutta, ogni sorta di fiale disposte in bell’ordine, nascondevano le pareti, riflettendosi nello specchio dietro al bancone con le loro macchie vivaci, verde mela, oro pallido, lacca tenera. Ma la curiosità della casa era, in fondo, dall’altro lato d’uno steccato di quercia, in un cortile a vetri, la macchina da distillazione, che gli avventori potevano vedere funzionare: alambicchi dai lunghi colli, serpentine che s’inabissavano sottoterra, tutta una cucina del diavolo dinnanzi alla quale venivano a sognare gli operai ubriaconi”*

Questa è una storia di degrado ed abbruttimento.

Tutte le buone intenzioni di vivere con semplicità ed onestamente si corrompono facilmente. Lentamente ma in modo imperterriti i protagonisti si avviano al degrado fisico e morale. Zola sembra quasi dirci che non c'è speranza e non tanto per fatalismo ma per quella teoria dell'ereditarietà dei caratteri che lo scrittore sosteneva e che in questo romanzo appare in tutta la sua evidenza.

Qui, ad esempio, si manifesta in tutta evidenza il temperamento lascivo di Nanà che fin da bambina è chiamata "sgualdrinella" e "viziosa" e che sorprenderà chi l'aveva consociata già adulta nel romanzo a lei dedicato.

In sottofondo l'epoca moderna che avanza: le macchine che soppiantano gli operai e la miseria che si affoga nei bicchierini di acquavite.

E' come un inevitabile giro vizioso: il primo bicchiere apre le danze dell'abbruttimento.

L'uomo e la donna diventano bestie che si scannano.

*"Poi, salendo i sei piani nell'oscurità, non poté fare a meno di ridere; ma era una brutta risata, che la faceva star male. Si era rammennata all'improvviso del suo antico ideale: lavorare serenamente, aver sempre da mangiare e un buco decente per dormire, allevare i figli, non essere battuta, morire nel proprio letto. No, era davvero comico il modo in cui il suo sogno s'avverava! Non lavorava più, non mangiava più, dormiva nel sudiciume, sua figlia correva la cavallina, suo marito la menava di santa ragione; non le rimaneva che il crepare sul lastriko, e avrebbe potuto farlo anche subito, se solo avesse trovato il coraggio di gettarsi dalla finestra, rientrando a casa. Nemmeno avesse domandato al cielo trentamila franchi di rendita e chissà quali riguardi! Ah! in questa vita si ha un bell'essere modesti! Aspetta e spera! Neanche la pappa e la cuccia, ecco la sorte comune! E la sua brutta risata si faceva più forte, al ricordo della sua sciocca illusione di potersi un giorno ritirare in campagna, dopo vent'anni di panni da stirare."*

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### Alex says

Don't actually remember when I read this, it was sometime just after college. I had read Nana for a class and needed to follow it up. As I write this blurb I'm belatedly following up L'Assommoir with Germinal. You really can't lose with Zola. Unless you're one of his characters, in which case you'll probably lose everything. To the bourgeoisie. And then you'll die. Probably of a terrible affliction.

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### Frankie says

L'Assommoir is well known for its portrayal of alcoholism. The 20th century prohibition movement took this novel up in a big way, as a morality play for the effects of alcohol abuse. Certainly if you read the final chapters, you will find yourself in Dante's first ring, with figures bouncing madly in padded cells, starving prostitutes limping down deserted streets, corpses rotting under the stairs. But the alcoholism in the novel serves merely as an enabler and multiplier for the miseries of the seven sins.

To me, poverty is the demon of the novel, not drunkenness. Certainly in any part of Paris, even the Faubourg Saint-Germain, hard drinking wreaks havoc, but the slope is much steeper if you happen to be poverty stricken and outside the octroi wall, especially with an empty stomach and others to pull you down. "Yes,

yes, men and women were a foul lot, in this bit of Paris where people had to live all on top of one another because they were so wretchedly poor." (p275)

When you boil it down, Zola's characters can be categorized as the innocent and the corrupt. Innocents like Gervaise certainly recognize corruption, but are so constantly inundated with it, they eventually accept it a bit at a time, as with Coupeau's gradual switch from wine to hard liquor. Coupeau, on the other hand, is a corrupt character from the start. He manages to hide it long enough from Gervaise, but it eventually seeps out and he barely avoids becoming a murderous abuser like Bijard. Zola's realism in characterization keeps the reader wishing for a *deus ex machina*, while accepting that even a character they adore could not and will not beat the odds.

The theme that seals this novel as a classic and makes it indispensable is not the A of Alcoholism but the F (not what you think, though that is certainly present and nearly synonymous) of Filth. Zola paints an astounding picture of pure, unadulterated, stomach-turning filth. Even in translation the accounts of laundry stains on undergarments, greasy tabletops, floors wet with spit, etc – achieve a visceral effect on any reader.

For the heroine, it all begins with dirty clothes, as Gervaise uses her skill with the scrub brush to enforce control over the circumstances in her life. She takes those around her to task, eventually setting up her laundry shop as a world of scoured cleanliness on a street of grime, moral and literal. Descriptions of excrement, sludge and stain always coincide with some moral degradation Gervaise faces, and eventually can no longer effectively scour. She lets the flood of filth wash over her, carrying off her decency, family and health.

She also leaves behind a devil named Nana, whose little adventures will teach us that there are non-alcoholic ways to be unhappy, in the ninth book of the Rougon-Macquart series.

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

Whenever I think I had a rough upbringing I read a book like this and realise I am a fluffed little pillow of good fortune. I was raised in a council tenement in a backwater semi-village in Central Scotland amid a backdrop of Protestant activism and spinster gossiping. But compared to Zola's Paris in *L'Assommoir*, I was mollycoddled in a warm nook of familial love and warmth.

So: Gervaise is hardworking laundress whose life is blown to smithereens by rotten good-for-nothing beer-sodden bastard men. Men are responsible for taking her life and flushing it down the sad Parisian cludgie, along with a family of unfeeling guttersnipe witches who make you want to pound their faces in with soldering irons. Oh, poor Gervaise!

Zola's style pioneers the close third-person, later taken to blistering heights of anal acuity in Joyce's 'The Dead.' The translator Robin Buss strikes a good balance between modern slang while retaining a sense of the original French dialect and mode of speech. To translate a book that uses archaic working-class slang and keep it both authentic and readable is no mean feat. So forgive little slips like 'getting laid' that creep in there.

I haven't been as stupefied by a work of hysterical genius since the hectoring morality of Tolstoy's Resurrection or the brutal sadism of Hubert Selby's 'Tralala.' Think twice about that extra beer before bed.

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### **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

Zola may be one of my all time favorite classic writers. He's so brutally honest about pre and post revolutionary France society, which was cruel and hopeless for so many. So far, this novel hasn't failed to disappoint. Gervaise is lost amid poverty and vice, questing to lead a moral life and provide for her children. Just when she swears off men believing they are all rotten, one comes her way. Can life be perfect? What is ideal?

Zola has an absolutely mesmerizing way of unfolding the vignette that is Gervaise's existence. He describes surroundings, characters, clothing, animals, nothing is left undisturbed.

Life, alas, has a dismal outlook for Gervaise and her family. It would be very easy to update this story by transplanting a single mother on welfare trying to make ends meet while dating an addict. Gervaise's story is today's story.

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### **Glenn Russell says**

“A heavy man of forty was serving a ten year old girl who had asked him to place four sous' worth of brandy into her cup. A shaft of sunlight came through the entrance to warm the floor which was always damp from the smokers' spitting. From everything, the casks, the bar, the entire room, a liquorish odor arose, an alcoholic aroma which seemed to thicken and befuddle the dust motes dancing in the sunlight.”

The above is but one of the many vivid descriptions in the world of Émile Zola's *L'Assommoir*, an urban underbelly of fleshy humanity emitting spit and sweet and stinking of booze; a swarm of filth and grime, grunting, gesticulating, swearing, slobbering. If this sounds like strong stuff, it is the very strong literary stuff of Zola-style naturalism, where we as readers are dragged ever so slowly through the boarding houses, streets and open sewers in the poorest slums of late nineteenth-century Paris.

At the heart of the novel is Gervaise, a young mother abandoned by her lover, who has to fight to earn an honest living as a laundress and starcher. Eventually she marries one Monsieur Coupeau and initially it appears life will be clean, decent and manageable, but her husband starts drinking and thus begins the family's downward spiral. *L'Assommoir* translated as *The Gin Palace* or *The Drinking Den* or *The Dram Shop* caused an uproar when first published – too fierce, too brutal, too sordid. Completely unapologetic, Zola simply replied that he wrote about life as it is actually lived among the poor.

Rather than focusing on all the nasty, grimy details, distasteful and disgusting by anybody's standards, including a scene where a child is being whipped by her drunken father, I read Zola's work with an eye to what place, if any, literature, music and the arts have in the lives of these poor Parisians. Perhaps surprisingly, there are a number of occasions, noted below, where the men and women in this novel encounter the arts.

After Gervaise and Coupeau's wedding ceremony, the several men and women of the wedding party pay a visit to the Louvre. When they walk through the Assyrian exhibit they adjudge the gigantic stone figures and monstrous beasts, half cat and half woman, very ugly. Then, when they make their way to the galleries of

more modern art, we read, "Centuries of art passed before their bewildered ignorance, the fine sharpness of the early masters, the splendors of the Venetians, the vigorous life, beautiful with light, of the Dutch painters. But what interested them most were the artists who were copying, with their easels planted amongst the people, painting away unrestrainedly." Then the wedding party moves to another room where they encounter Ruben's *Kermesse*, and Zola writes, "The ladies uttered faint cries the moment they brought their noses close to the painting. Then, blushing deeply they turned away their heads. The men though kept them there, cracking jokes, and seeking for the coarser details."

Let's pause here to reflect on the response of these men and women to the art on display. Is there anything unusual or unexpected in way they interact with the sculptures and paintings? Not really; seeing the ancient art of Assyria as ugly is understandable – they want to see pleasing images, not half-human grotesques. Also, understandable is their focus on the artists copying the great masterpieces rather than the masterpieces themselves – the process of creation is fascinating. Lastly, their visceral reaction to the racy country fête of Ruben is predictable, especially the men enjoying the coarse, sexy details. All this to say, in Zola's view, members of the lower classes can appreciate art as that art relates to their own lives. True, their viewing isn't the disinterested objectivity of a refined aesthete or knowing eye of an art historian but that's no reason to discount the way they value art and make art a part of their lives.

One fine evening, Gervaise hosts a dinner fit for royalty. At this point in the novel, she has put forth great effort to live a life that is a kind of oasis of virtue, industriousness and cleanliness amid the city's poor. This lavish dinner, complete with fine white linen tablecloth and expertly folded linen napkins, set up in the main room of her very own laundry shop is one of the highpoints of her social life. All those invited voraciously down wine and bread, goose and cake, and then each person takes their turn singing a song. Ah, music, the universal art; no need for instruments or special training -- simply singing songs. And through the singing we are given a glimpse into the soul of each of these poor men and women, quite a moving experience for us as readers.

There are a few more references to the arts: Gervaise's former lover, Lantier, owns books, teaches Gervaise's daughter Nana to dance (yes, this is the Nana from Zola's much read novel) and invites Gervaise to a Café Concert. Also, at one point, bemoaning her bad luck, Gervaise muses about a play she saw where the wife poisoned her much hated husband for the sake of her lover. Additionally, there is also a very important event worth noting, one involving Gervaise's sixteen year old son, Claude. We read, "An old gentleman at Plassans offered to take the older boy, Claude, and send him to an academy down there. The old man, who loved art, had previously been much impressed by Claude's sketches." This is a significant detail since in the fictional world of Émile Zola's social Darwinism people are bound and determined and molded by their social environment; yet, in this case, Zola acknowledges Claude's artistic talent could develop and be recognized despite his poverty-stricken surroundings. Lucky boy! If I were raised in such squalor, I wish I could be half as lucky. Unfortunately others are not nearly as fortunate or lucky in Zola's *L'Assommoir*. Read all about it . . . if you have the stomach, that is.

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### **Lobstergirl says**

There are parts of *L'Assommoir* (the word means something like pub) which are wonderfully comical. On balance, though, the novel is horribly bleak. It's not just about the working poor, but the nonworking poor,

the ones starving to death in garrets and alleys. There's a drunkard father who beats and kicks his wife to death over a period of months. When his 8-year-old daughter then takes over the raising of her younger siblings, he beats, whips, and starves her to death too.

But let's start with the comedy. My favorite scene in the novel is when Gervaise and Coupeau, along with their large wedding party, wander into the Louvre. Only one among them has been there before and knows the collection and the layout, so he leads them through the galleries. This goes on for several pages; in the Assyrian room, they find the "colossal stone figures...monstrous beasts, half cat, half woman, with death's heads, narrow little noses and swollen lips...very ugly. Stone carving was a damn sight better done nowadays."

Next the party moved into the Long Gallery where the Italian and Flemish schools are. More pictures and still more pictures, saints, men and women whose faces meant nothing to anybody, landscapes all black, animals gone all yellow, in fact hosts of people and things in violent mixed colours which were beginning to give them a bad headache. Monsieur Madinier had by now relapsed into silence and was leading the party slowly along, and they all tagged after him keeping in the same order, craning their necks and staring upwards. Centuries of art passed before their dazed ignorance – the subtle economy of the primitives, the splendours of the Venetians, the sleek and colourful life of the Dutch. But what really interested them the most were the copyists, with their easels set up and calmly painting all in the middle of the crowds. ...people sat down on the benches to watch the procession at their ease, while the attendants shut their mouths tight so as not to make rude jokes.

I love this discussion of salad at a dinner party in Gervaise and Coupeau's tiny, cramped apartment. This takes place before things start to go really downhill for Gervaise.

"You can keep it soaked in oil and vinegar and eat it tomorrow," suggested Madame Lerat.  
"It's better like that."

The ladies puffed and blew and looked regretfully at the salad bowl. Clemence said how one day she had swallowed three bunches of cress for lunch. Madame Putois capped that by saying she took heads of lettuce without taking off the outside leaves and just chewed them up like that, dipping them in salt. They all could have lived on salad and eaten bucketfuls of it. In short, with the help of this conversation, the ladies polished off the salad.

"Me, I could go on all fours in a field," confessed Madame Boche, with her mouth full.

Bru is an elderly man who lives alone in the same tenement as Gervaise.

But what really filled Gervaise with pity was old Bru in his niche under the stairs. He withdrew into it like a dormouse, rolled himself into a ball to keep out the cold and stayed there for days on end, motionless on a heap of straw. Not even hunger could make him go out now, for what

was the use of going out and getting up an appetite when nobody had invited him? When he hadn't been seen for three or four days the neighbours pushed open his door to see whether he had given up the ghost. No, he was still alive, not very much, but a little, just keeping one eye open until death remembered him! As soon as she had any bread herself Gervaise would throw him some crusts. She might be getting sour and coming to hate men, but she still had a real sympathy for animals, and old Bru, poor old soul, whom people were leaving to starve because he couldn't hold a tool anymore, was like a dog to her, an animal no longer fit for service that even the slaughterhouse wouldn't buy for the skin or the fat. She felt him like a load on her heart, always there across the passage, abandoned by God and man, feeding solely on himself, dwindling to the size of a child, withered and dry like an orange left to shrivel on a mantelpiece.

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This is the novel that introduces us to Nana, the child of Gervaise and Coupeau, who will become the prostitute with her own novel. Here, she is growing into a saucy, rebellious teen, slinging around cuss words. "I'll fuck off, I don't want him tanning my arse! Coo, look, he's done a dive. Christ, I wish he'd break his bloody neck." An apprentice in a flower making atelier, she "sniffed around and grew very excited whenever she found herself beside a girl who had lost her cherry."

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### **Duane says**

An exceptional novel, one of the best I've ever read, one I'm not likely to forget anytime soon. I would like to recommend it to my family and friends, but I fear they would consider it depressing and tragic and it is, but it is much more. Zola uses his brush to paint the picture of 19th century Paris as it was for the poor and working class as they dealt with low pay, poor working conditions, sickness, hunger, and abuse of every kind. Alcohol abuse is a major theme of the book as well as the abuse of women and children that by todays standards would be criminal. Zola's writing style, his writing skills, are at their very best here and the characters are developed so well that you become completely invested; you hurt, you cry, you get angry right along with them. I look forward to reading Nana and Germinal but I don't see how they could be any better.

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### **Lisa says**

"C'est de la morale en action, simplement!"

That is Zola's laconic explanation for "L'Assommoir", simply a moral message shown in action. And what devastating action it is.

Gervaise's story begins with her in tears, sitting at home late at night, watching her two little boys Claude and Etienne, four and eight years old, on a shared pillow. These are the future (anti-)heroes of The Masterpiece and of Germinal. Her first husband Lantier does not come home that night.

Thus the sad downfall of a young, motivated, good-natured and hard-working woman takes its course. As Gervaise tells a friend, her working life began when she was ten years old and started washing clothes in a river in Provence. Moving on to live in the poor parts of Paris, she has to face the even harder challenge of a

modern factory. The reader can only imagine the monstrous work environment and physical exhaustion she is exposed to, day after day, without losing hope.

She agrees to a second marriage, reluctantly, "tourmentée d'une bête de peur", and becomes the wife of worker Coupeau. Their wedding party at the Louvre constitutes a lighthearted break from their hard life, and has quite a few comical effects, for example when Coupeau recognizes the features of one of his aunts in the Mona Lisa.

But life remains hard, and marriage is no relief to a young woman. Gervaise is back working with the laundry three days after giving birth to her daughter Anna, the infamous heroine of Zola's prostitution novel Nana.

Setting the stage for the following brutal action, Zola makes it perfectly clear that a family like this can afford no extra hardship. But of course he doesn't spare them - he is a master realist, after all!

The literal fall of the already poor and struggling family occurs when Coupeau stumbles from a roof while working, and is seriously hurt. His daughter Nana, sitting on the pavement, witnesses the disaster that unfolds in nightmarish slow motion.

From now on, the family slides into desperation, alcoholism and violence. The accident on the roof is mirrored later when Nana sees her drunk father fall out of his bed, lying in his vomit, while her mother is engaged in depressed love-making with her half-brothers' father, the suddenly reappeared Lantier. To understand the brutality of her later life choices, Nana's childhood must be considered:

"Elle était tout grave."

Gervaise experiences abuse from all sides, and also has to deal with Nana's particularly difficult adolescence. At one point, she is so desperate that she sees an affront in the embellishment of her quarters of Paris - a part of Haussman's modernization plans - because it constitutes the complete opposite of her own wasting away between different obligations and emotional strains.

Step by step, she gives in to alcohol and hopelessness, slowly losing all sense of pride and humanity, only lamenting the fact that one can get used to almost anything except that one can't "prendre l'habitude de ne pas manger". Hunger is the only remaining feeling that tells her she is alive. But what kind of life is it?

The second half of the novel describes the downward spiral of addiction in its most minute details. Impressive and revolting!

When people die in La Goutte d'Or, others just comment that it means one drunkard less in the world.

Such a sad life, and what a legacy she leaves, Gervaise!

Her children will take their childhood with them into their respective adult lives, and they will be marked by

their mother's struggle for a spot to call her own.

She doesn't have much of a chance in the environment where she spends her life, however. A poor woman, and a mother. What could she have done to change her condition?

A moral message lived and caught in action!

Chapeau, Zola! This is YOUR masterpiece.

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### **Paquita Maria Sanchez says**

At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I honestly believe this may be the most depressing novel I have ever read. It has been a long time since I've (if I've ever) so excessively cringed, tensed up, sighed from such unadulterated frustration, and chewed the insides of my mouth from stress while reading about imaginary people. Last time I can remember my eyes popping out of my head anywhere near as cartoonishly from a fiction as Zola has managed here would probably be the first time I watched *Requiem for a Dream*, specifically, ya know, *that* sequence. This is worse than that. And disturbingly realistic. If you have ever watched anyone deteriorate from alcoholism, this book will eat you. It will eat you good.

That's pretty much all I can say for now, because I'm still too busy grinding my teeth to continue. Jesus. Anyway, I guess I should also mention that it's beautifully grotesque, exactingly plotted and paced, and Zola's observations on human behavior, emotions, and rationalizations for cruelty and excess are almost surgical. Ironically, it's gripping and heart-wrenching enough that it may make you want a drink.

I seem to remember a lot of goodreaders dissing on it, but I do look forward to reading *Nana* as soon as I can find a copy. The way in which Zola pre-developed her character is strikingly in-tune with modern scientific/psychological theories of childhood experiences which lead to sociopathology; the abuse, genetic predisposition, brain damage, poverty, trauma, lack of supervision, insubstantial education, and generally chaotic home-life are present, creating, as they say, "the perfect storm." I will seek that novel out once my wounds heal at least to the point of being crusty scabs which only occasionally rip open and drip. Dammit, Zola, why are you so terribly wonderful and wonderfully terrible?

The last lines are similar to a row of beautiful, gleaming daggers. I snifflled a bit. That rarely happens for me with fiction, but Zola got me. Bastard.

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### **Luís C. says**

Beware, reading the "Assommoir" can cause drunkenness!

Bending to turn the pages; drunk to know what hides the social violence ... A black intoxication, painful, which raises the discomfort and returns the brain.

Why is this tome one of the most famous of this author? To this question, every reader who has appreciated it can bring his personal answer. For my part, I explain this success by the fascination of the worst it generates in the reader. This was the case for me.

As always with Zola, human nature is naked, crudely. The absolute master of naturalist literature reveals in this novel all the darkness of souls who know neither moderation, nor charity, and even less reason.

In this 7th volume of Rougon-Macquart, the main character that the reader will follow (and which he is likely to attach) is Gervaise Macquart, the granddaughter of Adelaide Fouque, root-strain of the family. All the action of the novel takes place in Paris, in a working environment uncompromisingly described, so that at its publication, this is a book that has caused a stir in public opinion!

Gervaise is a washerwoman; a brave hard-working girl, yet the archetype of the one "who never has luck", so expect a Zola "black from black". Mistreated by the men who share her life, her goodness and endurance make her go through many trials and even lead her on the road to success but it is not counting on the "vices" to which man has so much ease to slip: idleness and laziness, alcoholism, egoism and waste. The energy and the patience of Gervaise will not succeed, it is towards the social abyss that all her family directs her steps.

**Well, I stop there, you will understand the tone of the novel.**

I finish giving you my opinion. Very nice "piece" of literature, work that "stirs the guts" in depth, "l'Assommoir" remains for me a staple of Zola, one of his finest writings, in his likeness: hard, realistic and moving.

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