

The Belly of Paris Study Guide

The Belly of Paris by Émile Zola

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Plot Summary

In December of 1851, Florent Quenu finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Wrongly accused of participating in a plot to overthrow the government, Florent Quenu is deported to Devil's Island in Dutch Guiana. Eventually, Florent escapes from Devil's Island and makes his way back to Paris. Émile Zola's novel, *The Belly of Paris*, begins shortly after Florent returns to France. Riding into Paris in the back of a large produce wagon, emaciated and exhausted, the streets are unfamiliar to him and everywhere the character casts his eyes, Florent is surrounded by food. Consumerism is definitely on the rise in the Empire and throughout the course of the novel, Florent finds this penchant for devouring goods and services progressively more sickening and disappointing.

Eventually, Florent is reunited with his brother Quenu and Quenu's family. Florent settles into the bourgeois lifestyle rather uncomfortably, taking a job as a fish inspector at Les Halles. However, having a job and a regular middle-class life begins to wear on the character and after a short while, Florent begins to burn for revenge and decides that he must do something to strike back at the French Empire. Florent and several others in the Les Halle neighborhood begin devising a plot to overthrow the government.

The people in Florent's small world come from various different social strata and represent varying political sensibilities. Whereas Florent becomes immersed in politics and political thought, others in the neighborhood put a higher value on goods and services. In and around Les Halles, there are rich, well-fed people like the Quenus and there are poor ones, like Marjolin, Cadine, and the wicked gossip Mademoiselle Saget. The majority of the people in the Les Halles neighborhood are interested in acquiring as much as they can, keeping what they already have, and making certain that no one threatens their way of doing business. Above all, Lisa Quenu and her neighbors want to see to it that no one, even Florent, upsets the status quo in Les Halles.

The petits-bourgeois have a way of closing ranks in the face of a threat to their way of life. After all, those in power, no matter how limited their sphere of influence, are often most interested in maintaining and expanding that power. Florent Quenu is an idealist who believes that what is right is often what is best. Those around Florent, however, see him as an outsider and a troublemaker. In the end, it is not the authorities who manage to suppress Florent Quenu, but those in his own backyard who prove to be his most formidable opponents.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Émile Zola's *The Belly of Paris* is set in mid-nineteenth century Paris. It is the story of Florent Quenu, a mild-mannered individual who is wrongly accused of murder and participating in an insurrection orchestrated by Louis-Napoleon in December, 1851. Florent is deported and sent to Devil's Island in Dutch Guiana. After he escapes from "Cayenne" as the penal colony is called, Florent Quenu returns to Paris to find that the entire city has changed. There are new streets, new taxes, a new government. The old *Marché des Innocents* (Market of the Innocents) has been replaced by the monolithic markets of *Les Halles*. The Paris Florent once loved has become a feeding ground for the *petits-bourgeois*. Merchants and shopkeepers, small-time bureaucrats and loyalists in support of the new Empire have turned the *Les Halles* neighborhood into a gluttonous, fear-driven den of hypocrisy and pettiness. *The Belly of Paris* follows Florent Quenu as he learns to adjust to a world that has gone on without him. Florent's tenderheartedness and his unrealistic idealism lead him to put his trust in untrustworthy people. In addition, Florent learns some very hard lessons about Parisian middle-class social mores and the intricacies of living in a close-knit community such as *Les Halles*.

Chapter 1 of *The Belly of Paris* begins with Madame François driving her wagon full of vegetables from Nanterre (a suburb of Paris) to *Les Halles*. It is just before daybreak, and the vendors form a caravan of carts, horses, and wagons all taking their vegetables into the massive open air market. Along the way, Madame François sees Florent lying unconscious at the side of the road. His clothes are badly worn and his face is drawn and haggard. Florent is a pitiful sight and Madame François notices how very thin the man is. The other vendors chide her for stopping to help a man who they believe is a drunk who has simply passed out. Bringing the caravan to a complete stop, Madame François, much to the consternation of the other vendors, takes pity on Florent and allows him to ride in the back of her wagon. Florent immediately falls asleep. Madame François attempts to strike up a conversation with Florent. She tells him that she is a widow and that since her husband's death, it has been her sole responsibility to grow the vegetables and get them to the market at *Les Halles*. Florent does not say much, partly because he is exhausted and partly because he is suspicious of revealing too much about himself to a stranger. Florent, resting on a mountain of Madame François' vegetables, recalls his journey from Devil's Island in Dutch Guiana (also known as "Cayenne") back to Paris.

Having escaped from Cayenne, after wandering through the jungles of Dutch Guiana for two years, it takes Florent quite a long time to eventually make his way back to France. Florent first arrives at the port of Le Havre. From there, with only fifteen francs tied into a corner of his raggedy handkerchief, he buys himself a ticket on the coach to Rouen. From Rouen, Florent must continue on foot. When he reaches the town of Vernon, he spends his last thirty sous on a small amount of bread. From Vernon, Florent walks the rest of the way to Paris. Overcome by hunger and fatigue, Florent passes out when he



reaches Courbevoie, approximately 5 miles from the center of Paris. By the time Florent comes around, they are at the market of Les Halle. Florent is overcome at the volume of food which surrounds him. The sight of so much food overwhelms Florent to the point of barely being able to focus.

Florent is left to guard Madame François' stall while she parks her vegetable wagon. While Florent sits with Madame François, they encounter Lacaille (another vendor), Mademoiselle Saget (a vicious neighborhood gossip, known for spreading rumors in exchange for foodstuffs) and Mère Chantemesse (the "adopted" caretaker of Marjolin and Cadine). Florent has been away from Paris for so long that the city is unfamiliar to him. In the light of day, Florent marvels at the sheer magnitude of the pavillions of Les Halles. Looking at the imposing structure of Les Halles, Florent likens the markets to a huge belly. Florent recalls the circumstances of his arrest and deportation. He remembers being wrongfully accused of taking part in Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état on the 4th of December in 1851.

Madame François introduces Florent to Claude Lantier before leaving to return to Nanterre. Claude Lantier is a painter and the nephew of Lisa Quenu, Florent's sister-in-law. Claude and Florent visit Monsieur Lebigre's café, where they meet Alexandre and have a drink. Claude leaves Florent to his own devices. On his walk through a new and very unfamiliar Paris, Florent notices the excess of the middle-class. Along with the huge volume of food arriving at Les Halles, he notices new shops selling any number of goods and thinks that Paris has somehow lost some of its original charm. Eventually, Florent runs into Monsieur Gavard, an old friend from Florent's pre-Cayenne days and the owner of a rotisserie at Les Halles. Gavard deals in poultry. Monsieur Gavard delightedly brings him to the Quenu-Gradelles' charcuterie.

The charcuterie is a butcher shop once owned by Florent's Uncle Gradelle, who has since died. The Quenu-Gradelle charcuterie is now owned and operated by Florent's younger brother, known simply as Quenu. Quenu is now married to La Belle Lisa and they have a little girl named Pauline. Upon seeing his older brother once again, Quenu is beside himself with emotion. Florent meets La Belle Lisa, his sister-in-law, and Pauline, his niece. Lisa's first impression of Florent is that he is much too thin. La Belle Lisa welcomes Florent warmly after seeing her husband's reaction to the long-lost man.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter of *The Belly of Paris* introduces the reader to Florent Quenu, the main protagonist, as well as several others in the supporting cast of characters who live in and around Les Halles. The fact that Florent does not recognize Paris upon his return is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, Florent is disorientated because of the amount of progress that has taken place. New streets have been added and the giant structure of Les Halles has replaced the former *Marché des Innocents* ("Market of the Innocents"). The implication here is that innocence in and of itself has been supplanted by the larger visions of those wishing to expand the scope of exchanges of goods and services within Paris. The sheer size of Les Halles nearly takes Florent's breath away.



The structures "seemed like some vast modern machine [...] supplying the digestive needs of a whole people [...]" (25).

In addition, toll barriers are installed so that goods entering the city can be taxed and monitored. The Empire which Florent and his eventual companions seek to overthrow has been busily fortifying itself in Florent's absence. To Florent, Les Halles seems like a "huge metal belly" (25). Secondly, the changes which Florent witnesses imply that what was once home to him is no longer navigable. This phenomenon foreshadows the character's unending battle to reacclimate himself physically, mentally, and emotionally to life in Les Halles. Thus, the character begins his post-Cayenne life as a stranger in his homeland.

Florent returns to find that life in Paris gone on without him. Upon arriving at Les Halles in the back of Madame François' vegetable wagon, Florent is nearly overcome by the excess of Les Halles. The author's descriptions of the produce surrounding Florent speaks to the sheer volume of food going into and out of the markets" each day. The narrator mentions "mountains of cabbages," "tremendous quantities" of carrots and turnips and other vegetables comprising "every note in the scale of greens" (25). What registers most in Florent's mind is the excess of it all. At one point, the reader learns that the character wishes for a moment that he was blind. All around him, the city seems to be bursting at the seams. Even the sight of the majestic Église Saint-Eustache (Church of Saint Eustace), situated at the opening of Les Halles, is too much for Florent to absorb with his eyes.

He suffers, looking around him at the signs and displays in shop windows. Sensory overload sets in and Florent is unable to process what he sees without becoming dizzy and lightheaded. After years spent in prison, years of starvation, paucity and lack, Florent's challenge becomes finding a way to feel at ease with the fatness and gluttony of Paris.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The second chapter begins with a re-telling of Florent and Quenu's history. Florent, the older of the two boys, is the product of his mother's first marriage. Florent's father was a very tender-hearted man from Provence in the south of France, on the Mediterranean coast. Florent's mother lavishes most of her attention on him. Quenu's father is their mother's second husband and when Quenu is still a very young child (around two or three years of age), his father dies of indigestion. Florent's mother does not invest in Quenu's education because she sees that the younger boy is somewhat slow, albeit even-tempered. Florent is in Paris studying law when their mother dies. Although not a rich woman, her ribbon business sells for a moderately good price and Florent assumes responsibility for raising Quenu all by himself.

The brothers move from Le Vigan to Paris where they share one large room in the Rue Royer-Collard. Florent discontinues his law studies and begins giving private lessons. Florent makes an effort to educate his brother, but Quenu shows no interest in learning from books. Nevertheless, Florent does his best to make a happy comfortable home for his younger brother Quenu and Florent asks nothing of the boy in return for his devotion. Florent does not require Quenu to help around the house at all. Consequently, Quenu grows up to be spoiled and indecisive. Eventually, Florent is able to resume his law studies and attend Faculty lectures once in awhile. This makes Florent happy and he believes life is working out for the two of them. However, Florent becomes very ill at one point and he is forced to remain at home in bed for an entire week. The illness results in a significant financial setback and Florent once again abandons his law studies to take a teaching position at a local boarding school.

By this time, Quenu is around eighteen years of age. As a result of Quenu's inability to stick with any particular trade, he drifts in and out of meaningless jobs. However, Quenu's going from job to job soon puts a dent in Florent's finances. Quenu first decides that he would like to be a watchmaker. Later, however, the young man becomes bored with the intricacy of the work and gives up. Next, Quenu ventures on a path to become a locksmith, but he finds this work to be too tiring. Within two years, Quenu tries out ten different occupations and succeeds at none of them. Florent soon finds that his teaching salary is not enough to support the two of them.

By this time, Florent has gotten into the habit of buying chicken at the rotisserie on those nights when he is not in the mood to cook. The rotisserie is owned by Monsieur Gavard. Gavard soon takes an interest in Florent and the three become friends. A short while later, Quenu discovers he has a love of food and cooking and the young man soon begins spending more and more time at Monsieur Gavard's rotisserie. Before long, Quenu is in the employ of Monsieur Gavard. Things begin to look up for the brothers when Florent and Quenu re-connect with their mother's brother, Uncle Gradelle. Uncle Gradelle does not take to the boys very well when Florent and Quenu first pay him a



visit in the Rue Pirouette. Seeing Florent's shabby clothes, Uncle Gradell, "a fat, insensitive, miserly fellow," is initially very suspicious of Florent and Quenu, thinking they might be after his money (41). It seems that Uncle Gradelle's charcuterie is quite a successful business. Quenu eventually goes to work for Uncle Gradelle in the butcher shop and learns the business in the process.

One day, Florent disappears mysteriously. After learning that Florent is scheduled for deportation to Devil's Island, Quenu begs Uncle Gradelle to intervene on his brother's behalf, but the older man refuses. Lisa begins working in Gradelle's charcuterie because Gradelle believes that a good-looking woman behind the counter will be good for business. Not long after La Belle Lisa comes to work in the charcuterie, Uncle Gradelle unexpectedly dies of a stroke while sitting at the table. He falls face-first into a plate of mince. People in the Les Halles neighborhood have misgivings about buying anything from Gradelle's charcuterie because of a rumor circulating that Uncle Gradelle died in the shop.

Since Florent has already been imprisoned and deported to Devil's Island, Quenu is the sole heir to Gradelle's fortune. Unfortunately, Uncle Gradelle did not leave a will that anyone knows of and no one is able to locate any money that Uncle Gradelle may have hidden in the shop. One morning, La Belle Lisa finds Uncle Gradelle's stash of eighty-five thousand francs at the bottom of a salting barrel. La Belle Lisa and Quenu agree not to mention the eighty-five thousand francs to anyone, preferring to re-invest it in the charcuterie. La Belle Lisa and Quenu are soon married. The couple decides to move the charcuterie to a new location, given the fact that people are hesitant to buy meat from there since Gradelle's death. The new Quenu-Gradelle charcuterie is much finer than the old shop and La Belle Lisa and Quenu spend a great deal of money revamping their new digs.

Upon Florent's return to Paris and the charcuterie, he begins to notice that his brother's life is decidedly bourgeois. La Belle Lisa insists that as Quenu's brother, Florent is entitled to a portion of Uncle Gradelle's money. Florent refuses, saying that his needs are simple and requests that La Belle Lisa hold onto his share for when he absolutely needs it. Florent begins to settle in to life with Quenu and La Belle Lisa but cannot make up his mind as to what he might like to do as far as work is concerned. Florent tells Pauline stories about a man who escapes from Devil's Island. Monsieur Gavard is the only one who knows that Florent has escaped from Devil's Island and suggests that Florent fill in for the ailing Monsieur Verlaque as a fish inspector at Les Halles. Monsieur Gavard thinks it would be wonderful if Florent worked at Les Halles as this would be a way to get back at the government for mistreating Florent so wickedly. Florent agrees to take the fish inspector job at the market in an effort to appease La Belle Lisa.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2, more is revealed about where Florent comes from, literally and figuratively. Having been reunited with his brother Quenu, the siblings' relationship is illuminated. The reader learns that Florent is a man who welcomes the opportunity to



sacrifice himself and his wants and needs in order to insure the comfort of another. In this instance, Florent goes without in order to provide comfort and shelter for his younger brother. Having been their mother's favorite, Florent's wish to care for his brother is partially a result of the guilt he feels about having received the majority of his mother's affection and attention. His fondness for children signifies a tenderness for things which Florent considers to be incorruptible and pure.

Florent is a studious man, interested in learning from books and then sharing his knowledge with others. The fact that Florent chooses to study law reveals that he is a man who is interested in order, structure and advocating for what he believes is right, according to pre-established guidelines. At the same time, Florent is a dreamer, as evidenced in the indulgent manner in which he raises his younger brother Quenu. Florent has an over-blown sense of responsibility, which at least partially contributes to his brother's aimlessness and lack of decision-making skills. Florent is almost effeminate in his deportment. There is something vaguely submissive about his personality which makes it nearly impossible for the reader not to sympathize with him. Unlike the other characters in *Les Halles*, Florent never gives in to his appetites.

Indeed, it can be said that Florent ignores his appetites outright, as though giving in to hunger or lust would somehow diminish his character in his own eyes. Quenu, Lisa, even old Uncle Gradelle, are mirror opposites of Florent. His relatives are all about the business of excessive consumption, liberally acquiring things, hoarding their personal resources and belching money. Quenu is an exception to this assertion, in that he is not intelligent enough to seriously consider things like money and acquisition. The Quenus are decidedly middle-class. They are part of the French *petits-bourgeois*. The Quenus belong to the merchant class and are therefore a step above those who own and operate the open-air stalls.

What differentiates Quenu and La Belle Lisa from the likes of the *Méudins* is real estate. Owning property gives one advantages not enjoyed by those who must set up and tear down their businesses on a daily basis. By dint of marriage, La Belle Lisa becomes an adult parent to her simple husband; a role she welcomes because of her belief in the utter rightness of everything she says and does.

Pauline, Florent's niece, follows in her parents' bourgeois footsteps. As soon as he enters the charcuterie, Florent is subject to La Belle Lisa's influence. Lisa is a formidable woman whose entire life is lived rationally and methodically. La Belle Lisa rarely makes mistakes. Given the excess which surrounds Quenu and La Belle Lisa, there is a decided lack of physical demonstrations of affection or love between the two. It is not difficult to imagine that the conjugal act which produced their daughter Pauline was somehow arranged and orchestrated by La Belle Lisa.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, Florent enters the world of Les Halles as a kind of civil servant. He accepts the position as a fish inspector in order to placate La Belle Lisa. Florent is going along with the program, as it were, because he still lacks direction. The boredom of doing nothing all day, hanging around the charcuterie and getting underfoot takes its toll on Florent. He is unsure of himself and feels slightly nervous about his re-entry into Parisian society. Florent is extremely fearful on his first day at work and is overwhelmed at the sights and smells of the markets. Gavard is pleased that Florent has accepted the position, as Monsieur Gavard believes that Florent's status as an undiscovered escaped convict is a perfect way to thumb his nose at the government. Now that Florent is employed, La Belle Lisa is satisfied, and the charcuterie settles back into a comfortable routine.

The characters introduced in this chapter widen Florent's world and add depth to his experience of Les Halles. Florent sees Logre the hunchback auctioneer in action for the first time. Logre, according to the ailing Monsieur Verlaque, is the best auctioneer at Les Halles. It is in this chapter that Florent and La Belle Normande first notice one another. Muche, La Belle Normande's son, takes a liking to Florent and Florent discovers a soft spot for the child. La Belle Normande permits Florent to tutor her son Muche twice a week at her home. La Belle Normande becomes very flirtatious with Florent, which upsets Florent greatly as he is inexperienced with women and is extremely shy. Claire Méhudin becomes sullen after learning of Florent's dealings with her sister Louise. Claire is very kind to Florent when he first begins inspecting fish at Les Halles, unlike the other women in the fish market, especially her mother, Mère Méhudin.

Tutoring Muche later proves to be a factor in Florent's eventual undoing as the words Florent instructs Muche to copy are considered derisive and traitorous to the French Empire of the day. Specifically, a sentence along the lines of "The day of justice will come... The suffering of the just is the condemnation of the oppressor," proves to the reader that Florent cavalierly allows his burgeoning political aspirations to permeate what should have been an activity no more suspect than learning the alphabet (128).

Gavard convinces Florent to give part of his monthly salary to Monsieur Verlaque. Florent begins to spend his evenings at Monsieur Lebigre's with Gavard, Lacaille, Charvet, Clémence, Logre and Robine. Florent shuts down La Belle Normande's fish stand after it is proven that La Belle Normande sells a spoiled brill to Madame Taboureau's maid for ten francs. Florent re-connects with Madame François and begins to write a "great work" on Cayenne. Simultaneously, he devises a plan to completely re-vamp "the administrative system of Les Halles." Thoughts of the injustice of his imprisonment at Cayenne prompt Florent to return to politics. He decides that he must do something to counteract the excess that seems to enfold him. Florent observes that "Paris itself [had] grown enormously fat" (124). La Belle Normande begins to spread



ugly rumors about La Belle Lisa Quenu, because she is convinced that Florent and La Belle Lisa are lovers. Mademoiselle Saget begins to gossip to the neighbors about Florent being lovers with La Belle Normande and her sister Claire. After learning that Quenu attends a political meeting at Monsieur Lebigre's, La Belle Lisa castigates Quenu, telling him, "France doesn't need you!" (149).

Chapter 3 Analysis

Upon entering the fish market, Florent is once again witness to the surfeit that has become Parisian life. Page 91 features a very lengthy descriptive litany of all the fresh and saltwater delicacies available to those who come to buy. Les Halles is not a place of lack. Rather, it is the site of the fulfillment of all the appetites known to Paris and its Citizens. The sheer volume of not only seafood but fruit, flowers, vegetables and meat further establishes the magnitude of Les Halles and its place in the larger fabric of life in the French capital. As a result of his new employment, Florent is also given a glimpse of the massive but intricate bureaucracy which controls the everyday workings of the markets. The bureaucrats are the upper-class in terms of the Les Halles hierarchy. The inner offices are where currency is monitored and accounted. It is also in this section of the fish market that auctions are conducted. According to Monsieur Verlaque, the man whom Florent has been hired to replace for a time, the administrative responsibility at Les Halles is shared by two separate kinds of police.

While watching the auction, Florent also becomes aware of the powerful feminine presence of the market. At once, he is enveloped in a sea of women: "There stood a line of palantines (fur wraps which covered the shoulders), a display of big white aprons stretched over stomachs and enormous breasts and shoulders" (94). For Florent, who has never in his thirty years even so much as looked at a woman, the sight of so many women is somewhat intimidating. This feeling revisits Florent later in the chapter during one of Florent's tutoring sessions with Muche. The sight of La Normande's large breasts causes Florent anxiety. He is uncomfortable with the smells of women, and the ease with which the women of Les Halles seem to inhabit and own their bodies.

Florent is further established as a soft touch when he agrees to give Monsieur Verlaque a portion of his monthly salary. Additionally, the fact that Florent would give his money to Verlaque so willingly proves that he is different than the others in his social and familial circle. Chapter 3 also signals the importance of information (false and otherwise) to the daily workings of Les Halles. Information in the form of gossip is a valuable commodity in Florent's new Paris. Madameoiselle Saget, the most vicious gossip in the Les Halles neighborhood, lives for the opportunity to spread what she knows. Mademoiselle Saget is able to trade gossip for bits of food.

Furthermore, Zola exposes the darker side of Les Halles by populating the novel with characters who are more than willing to believe the worst about their friends and neighbors. Even La Belle Lisa, with her supposed high standards of conduct, makes use of Mademoiselle Saget's penchant for stirring up trouble in order to gain knowledge of Les Halles' most recent happenings. In terms of plot progression, Chapter 3 is pivotal. It



is within this chapter that Florent begins to form his plan for revenge. Monsieur Lebigre's back room provides the perfect environment for Florent to voice his displeasure in public. Conversely, Monsieur Lebigre's provides the other characters an opportunity to take advantage of the naïve former schoolteacher. Florent is so blinded by his political ire that he does not take the time to distinguish between the scrupulous members of the group and those with ulterior motives. In fact, Florent is the only individual whose commitment to the cause of revolution is untainted by some type of self-interest.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 deals extensively with Marjolin and Cadine's beginnings at Les Halles. No one is certain of Marjolin's origins, as he has always lived at Les Halles. Marjolin always manages to find something to eat and a place to sleep at night. He goes from stall to stall, visiting all the vendors and becomes a child belonging to all of them equally. When he is around four years old, Marjolin notices Cadine walking with Mère Chantemesse and decides that he would like to be part of their little "family." Both of them are adopted by Mère Chantemesse; a widow who, having already lost three sons in infancy, loves children. Mère Chantemesse loves the children as much as those she birthed out of her body. She is kind yet strict at times and is not hesitant to discipline the children roughly when they go against her wishes. Marjolin and Cadine grow up together and form a close bond of friendship and love. The children roam Les Halles, discovering places to hide and manage to learn the ins and outs of the great market. Eventually, young Cadine discovers a taste for commerce and begins her life as a vendor at Les Halles. Soon, Cadine begins her own small flower business and begins earning money of her own.

Cadine and Marjolin first encounter Claude Lantier, the artist, in the tripe market. By this time, Marjolin and Cadine had developed a fascination for watching the animals being slaughtered and prepared for sale. The two orphans also make friends with Léon, an employee of the Quenus. Marjolin, Cadine and Léon often meet late at night in Léon's room to feast on delicacies stolen from various locations in and around Les Halles (including the charcuterie). At this point in time, Marjolin works for Gavard. Marjolin develops an infatuation for La Belle Lisa, who in turn begins to resent Florent's presence in her home and in the shop. She feels that since Florent is employed, he should be taking his meals elsewhere. In addition, La Belle Lisa suspects that Florent is up to no good because he spends such a great deal of time at Monsieur Lebigre's. After finding out that Florent and Claude are going to visit Madame François in Nanterre, La Belle Lisa decides to get to the bottom of what she believes are Florent's suspicious activities. When she goes to Les Halles in search of Monsieur Gavard, La Belle Lisa encounters Marjolin. Marjolin leads La Belle Lisa to the storerooms where Monsieur Gavard's live poultry is kept. Not finding his master there, Marjolin takes Madame Quenu to the cellars below Les Halles. Marjolin attempts to force himself on La Belle Lisa and La Belle Lisa knocks Marjolin unconscious with one punch. Returning to the charcuterie, Lisa snoops in Florent's room, hoping to learn more about his political involvement. In the country, Claude and Florent enjoy a day with Madame François. Claude expounds on everything from Parisian architecture to Auguste and Lisa's lack of artistic vision.

At the end of this chapter, Claude introduces the concept of Fat versus Thin by referencing a series of prints depicting the struggle between Carnival and Lent. Lantier categorizes the characters in the Les Halles neighborhood according to these two



distinctions. In the "Fat" camp, Claude places Quenu, La Belle Lisa, Gavard (although Claude asserts that Monsieur Gavard fancies himself a Thin person), La Sarriette, Cadine and Marjolin. The gossip Mademoiselle Saget and Madame Lecœur, Charvet, Clémence, Logre (the auctioneer) and Lacaille (another vendor at Les Halles) are all part of the "Thin" contingent. It is only the kind Madame François who defies categorization.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Interestingly, the bulk of Chapter 4 is devoted to the relationship between Marjolin and Cadine. The fact that Zola allots so much time to the Les Halles orphans proves to detract somewhat from the flow of the larger narrative. However, when considering their relationship in the broader context of the novel, it can be said that Marjolin and Cadine's relationship is somehow parallel to that of Quenu and La Belle Lisa. In the first place, Marjolin and Cadine are "adopted" by Mère Chatemesse. Similarly, Quenu and Lisa both come to be employed by Uncle Gradelle and live under his roof until his untimely death. Next is the matter of the power differential in the two couples. In both instances, it is the female partner who is more dominant while the two males are decidedly less so. In fact, in both situations, it is the women who "parent" their male counterparts. Temperamentally, the females (La Belle Lisa and Cadine) are rather alike.

The most obvious thing that sets the two couples apart is socio-economic position. The Quenus have money and property, while Marjolin and Cadine are among the poorest of the poor. Notwithstanding their places in Parisian society, both La Belle Lisa and Cadine are shrewd businesswomen. Cadine has a stronger entrepreneurial bent than La Belle Lisa, as the younger woman goes into business for herself while Lisa simply assumes managership of the charcuterie. Quenu and Marjolin are also alike in that each man is rather sweet and rather stupid at the same time. Neither man is capable of intentional aggression and neither man finds it necessary to use his physicality to obtain what he wants.

Worth noting in this analysis is the episode which takes place when La Belle Lisa and Marjolin are alone in the poultry cellars. Marjolin is overcome with his feelings toward La Belle Lisa. However, because of his station in life, he is ignorant of middle-class mores concerning men and women. Instead, Marjolin treats La Belle Lisa the same way he treats Cadine, who appreciates and agrees to be taken in so brutish a manner whenever Marjolin so chooses. Also, this episode serves to illuminate La Belle Lisa's fear of her own sexuality. In the narrative, Lisa experiences a kind of embarrassment when she recognizes that she might be slightly attracted to Marjolin. However, she convinces herself that her feelings toward the young man are strictly maternal in nature.

When the main action of the novel resumes, Florent's comfortable day to day life begins to disintegrate. Since Florent "[lives] in a world of illusion," he is unaware of the subtle rejection at the hands of the others in the charcuterie. Again, the protagonist's inability to understand and interpret the ways of the bourgeoisie and Les Halles as a whole puts him in a position to be undermined.



When Claude Lantier and Florent visit the home of Madame François in Nanterre, Florent feels a sense of relief at being away from the gluttony and weightiness of Les Halles. It is here that the seminal subject of Fat vs. Thin is plainly spoken of by Claude. The artist's categorization of the characters in Les Halles as either fat or thin gives the reader an opportunity to agree or disagree with Claude Lantier's point of view. It is specially significant that Madame François is the only character who defies classification according to Lantier's criteria. In fact, in his inability to decide which camp Madame François belongs to, Claude Lantier places the widow beyond such narrow categorizations, making her the most sympathetic character in the novel; perhaps even more sympathetic than Florent.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Convinced that Florent is up to no good, La Belle Lisa decides to consult with Father Roustan at Saint-Eustache, where she also sees Claire Méhudin. Lisa expresses her fears to the priest who tells her, "Decent people have that wonderful gift of always knowing how to do the right thing" (196). La Belle Normande happens to notice that La Belle Lisa had been in the church for over an hour.

The very next morning, La Belle Lisa once again sneaks into Florent's room, convinced of the rightness of her actions in attempting to uncover Florent's secrets. In a drawer among his papers, La Belle Lisa finds a photograph of La Belle Normande, which momentarily causes Lisa to forget about Florent and the revolution. La Belle Lisa takes her time and carefully scrutinizes the picture of Louise Méhudin. In the photograph, La Belle Lisa notices that La Belle Normande is wearing a brand new silk dress and a good deal of jewelry. La Belle Lisa examines La Belle Normande's features closely. La Belle Lisa loses herself in the examination of Louise's photograph. She studies La Belle Normande's hair, her mouth, her nose. When La Belle Lisa reads the inscription on the back of the photograph, she becomes upset. La Belle Lisa considers taking the photograph with her (to use as ammunition in her feud with La Normande) but thinks the better of it and returns the smiling Belle Normande to the desk drawer. Eventually, La Belle Lisa finds Florent's extensive handwritten notes on the planned insurrection.

Florent's intricate notes are a series of wild ramblings and paranoid imaginings. More importantly, La Belle Lisa had discovered proof of Florent's earnest desire to wreak havoc on the gluttonous city of Paris. Although she is tempted to turn the papers and her brother-in-law over to the authorities, Lisa decides to simply watch Florent for a little while longer. La Belle Lisa notices that Pauline is nowhere to be found. While her mother is out Pauline is lured away from the shop by Muche, the young son of La Belle Normande. Pauline is forbidden to play with Muche because he is La Belle Normande's son. Muche lures Pauline away from the butcher shop by promising to buy her candy. After Muche and Pauline leave the candy shop in the Rue de la Cossonnerie, Muche manages to talk Pauline into digging a "real" garden and planting pretend trees. In the process of their game, Pauline completely dirties herself from head to toe. Muche even convinces the little girl to fill her pockets with dirt, knowing that Pauline's appearance will utterly shock and anger her mother.

Mademoiselle Saget sees Pauline and Muche playing and chases the boy away before returning Pauline to La Belle Lisa at the charcuterie. On the way, Mademoiselle Saget wheedles information out of Pauline. Pauline tells Mademoiselle Saget about La Belle Lisa's reservations concerning Florent. Pauline reveals that she overheard La Belle Lisa talking to Quenu about Florent having "escaped from the galleys" (205). Upon seeing Pauline home safely, Mademoiselle Saget hurries off in search of Madame Lecœur and La Sarriette to share the juicy gossip she has squeezed out of Pauline. Much to the old



woman's delight, Mademoiselle Saget congratulates herself for having finally discovered Florent's well-kept secret.

Mademoiselle Saget happily hurries off in search of her rumor-mongering friend Madame Lecœur. On the way to the cellar under the butter markets, Mademoiselle Saget runs into La Sarriette at her fruit stand. La Sarriette joins Mademoiselle Saget and the three women sit in the cellar surrounded by all different types of cheese while Mademoiselle Saget shares the news about Florent. The women also discuss Monsieur Gavard and the fact that he has been behaving strangely. Apparently, Mademoiselle Saget had run into Madame Léonce, Monsieur Gavard's housekeeper. Madame Léonce informs Mademoiselle Saget that Monsieur Gavard had a pile of gold in his cupboard, having sold all his stocks for cash. The thought of piles of gold hidden away in Monsieur Gavard's cupboard is exciting to La Sarriette, who is covetous by nature. Also, Madame Léonce tells Mademoiselle Sageit that she is concerned about Monsieur Gavard's association with Florent. It also seems that Monsieur Gavard has recently purchased a revolver, much to the distress of Madame Léonce, who is also Monsieur Gavard's concierge.

La Belle Normande thinks she may be in love with Florent. Lebigre attempts to woo La Normande but she refuses his gifts of flowers and champagne. Logre, the hunchback auctioneer, becomes Florent's unofficial self-appointed lieutenant. Logre assures Florent that he will have no problems recruiting others to join their cause. Madame Quenu snoops in Florent's room again, and this time finds evidence that the day of insurgency is close at hand. In Florent's room, she finds armbands in various colors as well as sashes and banners. La Belle Lisa goes to the police to tell them all about Florent's illegal operations. In the préfet's office, however, La Belle Lisa finds out that she is the last person from the neighborhood to inform on Florent. It seems that La Sarriette, Mère Méhudin, Auguste (the charcuterie's apprentice), Mademoiselle Saget, and Monsieur Jules had all written letters to the authorities telling them what Florent and the little group in the back of Monsieur Lebigre's café had been up to.

Chapter 5 Analysis

La Belle Lisa's meeting with Father Roustan at the church of Saint-Eustache is a scathing indictment of the bourgeois attitude toward religion. Lisa, and others of the merchant class, believe that religion has its place in society but that it is not necessarily something that a person of strong moral fiber would need. La Belle Lisa does not consult the priest for any other reason than to validate her opinion of herself. Seeing Claire Méudin praying feverishly only serves to strengthen Lisa's view that those with little self-control and defective moral compasses are the ones who would need to pray.

While snooping in Florent's room for a second time, it is not her brother-in-laws plans to overthrow the government that upsets her. La Belle Lisa takes umbrage at Florent using Uncle Gradelle's desk as a hiding place for his insurgent writings. Hiding the documents in Uncle Gradelle's desk strikes Lisa as sacrilegious because of the fact that she used the desk herself before she married Quenu. Lisa feels violated by Florent's actions.



The episode in which Muche leads Pauline astray is another critique of French middle-class sensibilities of the day. Muche represents the lower classes and his betrayal of Pauline is the author's way of calling to attention the *petits-bourgeoisie's* preoccupation with looks as a representation of character. Pauline is dressed according to what La Belle Lisa would consider fitting for a young lady of her social standing. Muche makes a mockery of Pauline's finery by convincing her to fill her pockets with dirt. This advances the view that the *petits-bourgeois* is all show and little or no substance. In a way, the incident is similar to Marjolin's attempt to take La Belle Lisa by force in the poultry cellars. Had Pauline truly inherited her mother's sensibilities concerning proper and improper behavior, Pauline might have reacted to Muche in the same way her mother reacted to Marjolin's unexpected and unwelcome advances.

When the neighborhood gossips (Mademoiselle Saget, Madame Lecœur and La Sarriette) meet in the butter and cheese cellars, they are enveloped in the smell of ripening cheese. The pronounced odors lend a lurid air to their private session. The stench of certain cheeses is emblematic of the stench of lies and rumors which originate within their small circle, most especially the rumors told by Mademoiselle Saget.

La Belle Lisa's experience at the police station is perhaps her lowest point in the narrative. Unbeknown to her, Lisa is the last person in the Les Halles neighborhood to tell the authorities of Florent's plot to take revenge on the government. Even more telling than her resulting embarrassment is the list of informers (those who wrote letters well in advance of her personal appearance at the office of the *Préfecture*). With the exception of Monsieur Lebigre, none of the individuals are members of the merchant or middle classes. This signifies Lisa having lowered herself in her rush to play the heroine of Les Halle by going to the police in person to inform on Florent.

Ironically, when the Quenus attend a performance at the *Théâtre de la Gâtité*, they see a melodrama entitled *La Grâce de Dieu* ("The Grace of God"). The irony here is that La Belle Lisa does not believe in God *per se*, but only in her own good sense. La Belle Lisa is vindicated when she sees La Belle Normande and *Mère Méhudin* sitting in the upper balcony with the rest of the common people.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The week following La Belle Lisa's visit to the authorities, the gossip in the Les Halles neighborhood has finally caught up with Florent. Everyone in the shops and the stalls turns against him. The chapter opens with Florent taking a walk through Paris, visualizing how the insurrection will take place. He begins at the Palais-Bourbon. Convinced that the time for action is drawing near, Florent sees in his imagination where the cannons would be positioned and in a notebook maps out various points of attack: "Already he could see the fighting, the groups of men clinging to those columns [...]" (250). On his way back to Les Halles, Florent meets up with Claude Lantier who convinces him to go in search of Marjolin. They find Marjolin and Cadine kissing in the poultry storeroom. Shortly thereafter, Florent and Claude Lantier watch as Marjolin sets about the slaughter of the pigeons. Marjolin is an expert. Florent, who is squeamish by nature, becomes faint and has to be led outside.

The authorities enter the neighborhood, ready to arrest Florent and his accomplices. They first arrive at La Belle Normande's house and demand to search the premises. The arrival of the police upsets everyone in the Méhudin family. The authorities seize Muche's lesson books, claiming them as evidence of Florent's unlawful activities. Claire Méhudin flies into a rage, vowing to tell Florent that her sister Louise is responsible for calling the police. La Belle Normande, Mère Méhudin and Mademoiselle Saget lock Claire in her room. Mademoiselle Saget cannot wait to spread the news and hurries to the Quenu-Gardelles' charcuterie to crow to La Belle Lisa about the uproar at the Méhudin home. La Belle Lisa does not tell her husband that the police are waiting upstairs to arrest Florent as soon as he returns from the fish market. Lisa intentionally leaves Quenu in the dark because she knows that seeing his brother taken away for a second time will surely devastate her husband, who is known to be overly-emotional. Now that she knows Florent will soon be out of the way, La Belle Lisa decides to call a truce with La Belle Normande and makes up her mind to return to La Belle Normande the photograph of her that was hidden in Florent's room. At Lisa's behest, Mademoiselle Saget approaches La Belle Normande to offer her the terms of the truce. La Belle Lisa and La Normande agree to let bygones be bygones and become friends again.

In a surprising turn of events, old Monsieur Gavard is arrested after the police find "Ambrose," the revolver. As he is escorted to jail, Monsieur Gavard manages to slip a house key into La Sarriette's hand, instructing her to clear out his rooms and burn his personal papers. Although Madame Léonce is at first reluctant to allow the three harridans into Monsieur Gavard's rooms in the Rue de la Cossonnerie, she finally relents. La Sarriette, Madame Lecœur and Mademoiselle Saget poke around in Gavard's rooms until they find ten thousand francs in the cupboard. As soon as they locate the money, which was their aim all along, Madame Lecœur and La Sarriette divide the ten thousand francs between the two of them. Mademoiselle Saget and Madame Léonce receive fifty francs apiece. Madame Léonce begrudgingly accepts the



money, complaining that fifty francs is a paltry sum considering all the time and effort she put into taking care of Gavard while he lived in her building. Before they depart, La Sarriette makes a point of reminding Madame Lecœur that Gavard had wanted them to burn his papers. Madame Lecœur disregards Gavard's instructions to destroy the incriminating evidence, as the police will soon arrive there in any case.

Florent returns to his inspector duties at the fish market, unaware of what awaits him when he arrives home. Florent does notice, however, that the women at the fish market are acting more strangely than usual toward him. None of the women make eye contact with Florent and women are whispering to each other as he passes. Florent tells himself that the women are probably planning another of their attacks on him: "For some time now, these huge, terrible women had not given him a day's peace" (267). Knowing that the police are hiding upstairs in Florent's room at the charcuterie, Mère Méhudin tells him that "a middle-aged gentleman" is at the charcuterie looking for him. When he arrives home, Florent is immediately arrested and taken into custody. Claire escapes from her locked room too late to stop the police from taking Florent away. La Belle Lisa breaks the news of Florent's arrest to her husband who is, of course, the last to know. Two months later, Florent and Gavard are sentenced to deportation. Lacaille and Logre are acquitted. Alexandre is sentenced to two years in prison.

Claude Lantier visits Madame François in Nanterre. He expresses disgust for the people in Les Halles for treating Florent so cruelly. La Belle Normande marries the owner of the café and becomes La Belle Madame Lebigre. Otherwise, life in Les Halles returns to its former state of fat complacency. La Belle Madame Lebigre and La Belle Madame Quenu, now social equals, are once again on speaking terms. Cadine and Marjolin are still lovers. Muche and Pauline are once again playmates. Auguste and Augustine do finally marry and open their own charcuterie in Montrouge. Monsieur Lebigre, because of his role in helping to bring Florent to justice, is able to expand his business and becomes a tobacconist as well as a wine merchant.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The narrator's assertion in that "Florent lived in a world of illusion" is further substantiated in the final chapter of *The Belly of Paris* (175). The character is completely unaware of what is happening around him until the moment of his arrest. Gullibility leads Florent to believe that the others from Monsieur Lebigre's are actually in agreement with his plan to overthrow the Empire. Florent simply thinks that people are gossiping and saying unkind things behind his back. The reality is that the people in Les Halles hate him desperately enough to hand him over to the authorities, either for monetary gain (as in the case of both Logre and Lebigre) or out of pure spite (as in the case of Mère Méhudin and the other letter writers). To some extent, it can be said that Florent is responsible for his own fate. Had he been a bit more cautious with his talk, he may have avoided arrest. Considering Florent's situation from another angle, it is his immaturity and lack of social savvy which prove, at least in part, to be at the root of his undoing. The markets consume Florent in much the same way Parisians consume food, goods,



and each other. Once Florent and Gavard are scheduled for deportation, the neighborhood returns to its former respectable state.

Page 274 recounts the neighbors' post-Florent experiences. Those around the protagonist simply pick up where they left off. Florent is no longer in a position to upset their petit-bourgeois way of life and they are all the happier for it. Claude Lantier is the only character besides Madame François who is able to see what a sham Les Halles really is. In the end, the message is that Les Halles is nothing more than another oppressive social system. While not a governmental entity, Les Halles has its own form of justice and its own brand of retribution for those characters who, like Florent, decide to make waves. In fact, *The Belly of Paris* establishes the market society as nearly as formidable as the Empire itself. While the authorities had been watching Florent ever since he arrived at Le Havre, it took them quite a while to actually move to arrest him. In the end, the gossip and rumor mill proves itself to be just as effective at expelling unwelcome human fodder as the police. Florent's story begins and ends the same way. The narrative is circular. Florent begins by escaping from Cayenne. Florent's adventure ends with a return to Devil's Island.



Characters

Florent

Florent Quenu is the main protagonist of *The Belly of Paris*. A man of gentle temperament, Florent is tall and lanky. He is painfully thin and is always hungry. Unlike those around him, Florent is unconcerned with money and appearance. He cares nothing for outward trappings and thus is usually dressed in black trousers and a black coat. As a result of his tender nature, Florent has a soft spot for children. Florent is disgusted by the excess he witnesses upon his return to Paris, and as such, the sight and smell of food becomes more and more repugnant to him as the narrative progresses. Having been wrongly accused and sent to Devil's Island, his main focus eventually becomes exacting revenge on the government which imprisoned him. Florent is haunted by the memory of a young woman who was shot during the coup d'état. The young woman becomes the illusory object of Florent's desire. As a result of this fantasy infatuation, combined with a natural tendency toward shyness as well as a lack of self-confidence and quite limited social skills, Florent is unable and unwilling to interact on a romantic level with La Belle Normande or any other woman. Florent has no close friends to speak of except for the painter Claude Lantier. He is, however, exceptionally fond of Madame François. Florent's fondness for the widow from Nanterre is based on the kindness and care Madame François shows him when she finds Florent unconscious and half-starved at the side of the road on the outskirts of Paris. To him, Madame François symbolizes comfort and generosity of spirit.

Quenu

Quenu, whose first name is never revealed, is Florent's younger brother. Spoiled and pampered by his mother as a child, Quenu was never properly educated and as such shows none of the intellectual prowess of his brother. In his younger years, Quenu was only concerned about himself. After their mother dies, Florent assumes complete responsibility for his brother's well-being. Like their mother, Florent coddles Quenu: "[Florent] spared [Quenu] the most trifling duties about the house; he did all the shopping, cooking, and cleaning [...]" (39). As a result of Florent's indulgence, Quenu grows up to be a weak-willed, milquetoast of a man. While assisting Monsieur Gavard in the rotisserie, however, Quenu discovers a love of food and cooking. The narrator describes Quenu as being "too fat for his age" (36). Interestingly, his long, clean-shaven face resembles a pig's snout, much like the cuts of meat he handles each day in the butcher shop. Similar to his brother, however, Quenu is quite tender-hearted and as such, he often defers to La Belle Lisa's wishes in matters affecting the household as he dislikes confrontation of any sort. He is therefore often excluded from matters of importance. Quenu is easily manipulated and overly-emotional. As an adult, his primary concern in life is the charcuterie. He is especially proud of his black pudding (or "boudin noir"), a French black sausage made of pork and seasoned pig's blood. Since Quenu,



like his brother Florent, lives in his own world, Quenu is the last person in the Les Halles neighborhood to learn of his brother's fate.

Lisa Macquart Quenu (La Belle Lisa)

Lisa is Quenu's wife and Pauline's mother. La Belle Lisa is thirty years old. Born in Plassans, she has no relationship with her father. Lisa inherits her mother's strong work ethic and reasonable, level-headed temperament. Uncle Gradelle hires Lisa to work in his shop because of Lisa's beauty and sense of responsibility. Gradelle believes that "a good-looking girl would set off his display of cooked meats and help to tempt his customers" (44). Lisa's former employer, the widow of a postmaster who lived in the Rue Censier, leaves her ten thousand francs. Men and women alike consider her to be quite beautiful, hence her nickname, La Belle Lisa. Lisa has a captivating, albeit elusive, smile. Madame Quenu, as she is known to her peers, considers herself to be a paragon of matronly virtue and common sense. She is a large, well-proportioned woman whose white apron is always clean (even though she works in a butcher's shop). La Belle Lisa takes a great deal of pride in her appearance. Lisa is overly concerned with other people's perceptions of her and her family. She and Louise Méhudin (La Belle Normande) are arch-rivals and the two women keep a close eye on one another. Their friendship is one of tacit civility. Figuratively speaking, it is La Belle Lisa who "wears the pants" in her relationship with Quenu, as she is much more shrewd than her simple-minded husband. Unlike her husband, Lisa Quenu possesses a natural head for business and the success of the charcuterie is, in large part, due to her vision and commitment to maintaining comfortable bourgeois lifestyle. She is self-righteous and somewhat conceited. Things go well for La Belle Lisa because she wills them to go well.

Louise Méhudin (La Belle Normande)

Louise Méhudin is a fishwife who owns and operates a stall in the market at Les Halles. She is called La Belle Normande because of her beauty and her imposing stature. She is the second La Belle Normande, her mother (Mère Méhudin) having first been given the nickname in her younger, more comely days. La Belle Normande is not a small woman, quite the opposite. Her wide hips and voluptuous proportions make her an object of admiration among the "ladies" of Les Halles. She is considered a widow even though she never actually married. A brief engagement to a corn merchant (who broke his back shortly after they decided to be married) produced her son, known only as Muche. Louise Méhudin is a bawdy, flirtatious woman who unashamedly flaunts her sexuality. She is fond of pretty shawls, colorful ribbons and bows and often wears a great deal of jewelry. She is the older of Mère Méhudin's daughters and is very different both in looks and temperament from her sister Claire. Louise Méhudin is La Belle Lisa's nemesis. Knowing that Lisa is also considered quite beautiful, La Belle Normande takes every opportunity to insult, embarrass, and otherwise harass her bourgeois counterpart. Louise is not nearly as preoccupied with other people's opinion of her as La Belle Lisa. When La Belle Normande sees how gentle and caring Florent is with Muche, she becomes infatuated with Florent and decides that they should be married. After the



people in and around Les Halles learn of Florent's plot to overthrow the Empire, however, La Belle Normande's feelings cool and she becomes another of Florent's detractors. La Belle Normande eventually marries Monsieur Lebigre (the owner of the café where Florent and the others meet regularly to discuss politics). Her marriage to Monsieur Lebigre puts her on equal footing with La Belle Lisa as part of the Parisian middle-class.

Monsieur Gavard

Monsieur Gavard is the owner of a rotisserie in Les Halles. A longtime friend of the Quenu brothers, Gavard is a widower whose wife dies of consumption, precipitated by the ever-present smell of chicken grease. He is the brother-in-law of Madame Lecœur. Gavard, a man of approximately sixty years old, is not a very tall man. He has a stocky build and a cheerful baby face and he wears his gray hair in a crew-cut. Although he leads a decidedly upper middle-class kind of life and has plenty of money to spend, Gavard fancies himself a would-be thorn in the side of the French government. As such, he is constantly on the lookout for ways to foil the Empire. Others recognize that Gavard is a member of the petit-bourgeois, although he would not admit to it. As a member of the small insurrectionist group that meets in Monsieur Lebigre's back room, Gavard is the only individual to eventually be deported to Devil's Island with Florent. Gavard expresses a personal preference for fat women, which stands to reason since Gavard himself is quite plump and rather self-indulgent. Thinness strikes Monsieur Gavard as a perversion of nature, best to be avoided at all costs.

Claude Lantier

Claude Lantier is an artist and a close friend of Florent. In fact, Claude is the closest friend Florent has. Claude Lantier is La Belle Lisa's nephew, although the narrative does not elaborate on this fact. A self-proclaimed "Thin" person in a world of "Fat" people, Claude is much more concerned with aesthetics than with materialism. His sensibilities are decidedly sensual. Claude loves the sights and smells of the food stalls at Les Halles more than the goods themselves. He is ever on the lookout for the next subject of an etching or drawing. Whereas those around him (with the exception of Florent) are engrossed in consuming, Claude would rather have an eyeful of beauty than a belly full of food. Claude does not earn much money selling his art, yet it is unclear exactly how he manages to support himself. He is not ashamed to accept a drink from someone willing to pay. Claude has a slim nose, big bones and a large head. He wears a beard and his eyes are rather small but bright. Lantier's posture is poor and consequently, he always appears to be stooped over. Also, Claude has a habit of twitching nervously (16). Claude Lantier is a typical starving artist.



Marjolin

Marjolin's origins are unknown. Abandoned at the age of two or three, he is discovered sleeping in a pile of cabbages in the Marché des Innocents (which was later torn down and replaced with Les Halles). Thereafter, he was known simply as "a child of Les Halles" (151). Living according to his wits, Marjolin becomes a favorite of the women who own and run the market stalls and he somehow manages to keep himself clothed (albeit poorly) and decently fed. Eventually, Marjolin is taken in by Mère Chantemesse, who also takes in the orphaned Cadine. As a result of his slow-wittedness, Marjolin becomes a kind of plaything for Cadine and as such, he is subject to her whims and fancies. Periodically, Marjolin works with Monsieur Gavard at the rotisserie. Marjolin is infatuated with Lisa Quenu. So much so, in fact, that Marjolin attempts to show his affection for La Belle Lisa by attempting to force himself on her in the cellar of Les Halles amid Monsieur Gavard's chicken coops. La Belle Lisa strikes Marjolin, knocking him unconscious. From that point on, Marjolin becomes even more slow-witted, with no recollection of incident. Marjolin is tall and has a very large build and broad shoulders. His blond hair is long and curly and his face belies a certain innocence that brings out maternal feelings in women.

Cadine

Cadine, like Marjolin, is abandoned as a child and left at Les Halles to fend for herself. Cadine was beaten at home and left on a doorstep by her mother. At the age of about two years, Cadine is "adopted" by Mère Chantemesse (who subsequently also takes charge of Marjolin). Cadine and Marjolin are inseparable. Cadine, as it turns out, is a natural born entrepreneur. After working for another woman in a flower stall at Les Halles. Not wanting to play the role of servant to anyone, Cadine eventually goes into business for herself and begins selling her own bouquets at the age of twelve. She is mischievous, cunning and sometimes a tad sadistic in her treatment of Marjolin. Although she often teases Marjolin mercilessly and treats him poorly, Cadine does love him dearly. Cadine is extremely strong-willed and wild at heart. She lives by her wits. There is an inherent sensuality in everything Cadine does. Claude Lantier admires Cadine and Marjolin for their almost animalistic free-spiritedness.

Auguste Landois

Auguste Landois is originally from Troyes. He works for Quenu and La Belle Lisa in the charcuterie. Auguste is approximately twenty-eight years old and is engaged to his cousin, Augustine. After the two are married, Auguste plans to open a charcuterie of his own in Troyes. Auguste is said to be "fat to an unhealthy degree" (56). Also, his head is extremely large and he is prematurely bald. Auguste is responsible for bleeding the pigs, something in which he takes a great amount of pride as he is quite expert at the process. Auguste considers Florent's plan to overthrow the government to be a threat to the Quenu-Gradelles' charcuterie and, by extension, his plans for a future with Augustine. AS a result of this fact August, in addition to several others in the



neighborhood, is ultimately responsible for seeing to it that Florent is arrested and deported. Eventually, Auguste does marry Augustine and buys a charcuterie of his own in Montrouge.

Monsieur Lebigre

Lebigre owns and operates a neighborhood café which is located in the Rue Pirouette. Lebigre is another fat man who possesses what the narrator refers to as "regular features" (19). Monsieur Lebigre sports a beard which is rather unkempt. He is in love with Louise Méhudin (La Belle Normande) and quite regularly sends her gifts in an effort to win her affection. In Chapter 2, it is revealed that Monsieur Lebigre is a small-time moneylender, notorious for charging the greengrocers exorbitantly high interest rates. He is also "in the pay of the police" (141). Lebigre, along with several others in the Les Halles district, is directly responsible for Florent's second imprisonment.

La Sarriette

Mme. Lecœur's niece, La Sarriette is a willful girl of around twenty years old. She lives with her lover, Monsieur Jules, in a suspect part of Paris. La Sarriette is plump, pretty and very flirtatious. The young woman operates a fruit stand in Les Halles. La Sarriette, like her aunt Madame Lecœur, is extremely money-hungry.

Mère Chantemesse

An old woman who lives in the Les Halles neighborhood. It is Mère Chantemesse who finds Cadine in the streets and takes her in. Later, she also "adopts" Marjolin. Mère Chantemesse is described as "a crusty but kind woman getting on for sixty" (153). Like the other women of Les Halles, Mère Chantemesse is interested in getting as much as she can while paying as little as possible.

Mademoiselle Saget

Mademoiselle Saget is the neighborhood gossip of Les Halles. It is she who spreads the rumor that Florent is having an affair with La Belle Lisa. Mademoiselle Saget is also responsible for the rumor that Florent is sleeping with both of the sisters Méhudin. Nothing is known about Mademoiselle Saget except that she claims to have been born in Cherbourg. Her source of income is also unknown. At one point, Monsieur Gavard reveals to the neighborhood that Mademoiselle Saget feeds off the refuse of the rich.

Madame Lecœur

Madame Lecœur is Monsieur Gavard's sister-in-law and the aunt of La Sarriette. She operates a butter and cheese stall in Les Halle. Madame Lecœur is another of the



neighborhood gossips. She, Mademoiselle Saget and La Sarriette (to a lesser degree) is diligent about gathering bits of information which may be used against others when it proves most convenient for her. Madame Lecœur accuses her brother-in-law Monsieur Gavard of being a stingy miser. Upon Gavard's deportation, however, it is Madame Lecœur who makes off with the bulk of Gavard's money.

Madame Taboureau

Lisa's best friend, Madame Taboureau owns a bakery in the Rue Turbigo. Reputed to be the best bakery in the neighborhood, Madame Taboureau is beyond reproach as far as her neighbors and fellow shopkeepers are concerned. She is seen as another paragon of virtue and common sense in the Les Halles neighborhood.

Uncle Gradelle

Florent and Quenu are Gradelle's nephews. Their mother is his sister. Gradelle owns a charcuterie (pork butcher shop) and is less than kind to the boys when he first meets them. However, when Florent becomes ill, Quenu finds his love for cooking and their uncle encourages him to work in his shop in the Rue Pirouette. Gradelle dies of a stroke one morning. He falls face first onto the mincing board. La Belle Lisa later discovers Gradelle's fortune in the bottom of a salting barrel. Uncle Gradelle had hidden away nearly ninety thousand francs. After their marriage and their move to the new shop in the Rue Rambuteau, Lisa and Quenu keep Uncle Gradelle's writing desk in their bedroom because La Belle Lisa believes it will bring them luck.

Madame François

A widow from Nanterre, Madame Francois is a farmer and a market vendor at Les Halles. It is Madame Francois who finds Florent lying by the side of the road one morning. She is a friendly woman, and is well-known in the vegetable market. Madame Francois introduces Florent to Claude Lantier, the artist. Madame Francois sells turnips and carrots at Les Halles and is the first person Florent encounters on his way into Paris. Madame Francois is approximately thirty-five years old and has a "wide, calm face" (12). She has a solid build with rather masculine features. Madame Francois' outdoor life has made her physically very hearty. She has black eyes and is naturally inquisitive about others' lives.

Monsieur Verlaque

A fish inspector in Les Halles, Monsieur Verlaque is taken ill and Florent takes over his position. Verlaque is a small, thin man with pale skin. He has a persistent cough and he keeps himself wrapped in "flannel, neckerchiefs, and mufflers" (90). Monsieur Verlaque lives in Clamart, a suburb of Paris. He eventually succumbs to pneumonia and his position as a fish inspector is permanently filled by Florent.



Muche

Muche is the young son of Louise Mehudin ("La Belle Normande"). Raised in the fish market of Les Halle, Muche is everyone's darling. He is spoiled by the fishwives and left to run wild on the avenues while his mother tends and sells her wares. Muche develops a friendship with Florent and Florent becomes his tutor. Physically, Muche is likened to an angel. His sparkling blue eyes and head of curly hair only serve to contrast the curses and coarse language which comes out of his mouth. Muche is a playmate of Pauline Quenu until their mothers' bitter rivalry prompts the women to forbid them to see one another.

Claire Méhudin

Claire is the younger sister of La Belle Normande. She and her older sister are constantly at odds with one another. Claire is fair-skinned and has blond hair and a pretty face. Initially, she is the only woman at the Les Halle fish market who befriends Florent. After Florent becomes Muche's tutor, however, Claire becomes jealous because this means that Florent will be spending time with Louise, her sister. After Florent begins tutoring Muche, Claire flatly refuses to speak to Florent or have anything to do with him.

Charvet

Charvet is a member of the small group of citizens who meet in Monsieur Lebigre's back room to talk politics. Charvet is a disillusioned teacher who becomes envious of Florent after Gavard and the others agree to Florent's plan for overthrowing the government. Physically, Charvet is not much to look at. He is tall, and rather scraggy, with a clean-shaven face and long hair.

Clémence

Clémence is Charvet's common-law wife. Clémence works in the fish markets at Les Halles. She serves as a type of secretary to Monsieur Manoury. Clémence and Charvet split all their expenses in half equally and they each pay their share. Clémence eventually loses her position at the fish market when she is overheard naming the fish after government officials.

Madame Léonce

Madame Léonce is the concierge at Monsieur Gavard's place on the Rue de la Cossonnerie. She also works as Gavard's housekeeper. She also keeps "the keys of his cupboards" and has been known to minister to Gavard when he is ill (214). Madame Léonce is rather protective of Monsieur Gavard's privacy and his money. A rather sour woman, Madame Léonce can be quite chatty, even though she speaks very slowly. It is



she who is the last line of defense against the gossips (Mademoiselle Saget, Madame Lecœur and La Sarriette) when Gavard is finally taken into custody for his part in the aborted uprising.

Alexandre

Alexandre is a young man of around twenty-two years of age. He works as a porter in Les Halles. Alexandre has a large muscular frame and a fine physique. According to Claude Lantier, Alexandre is fond of activities which require some measure of strength. Alexandre enjoys boating, hunting and other outdoor pursuits. For a brief time, Alexandre attends the political meetings in Monsieur Lebigre's back room.

Augustine

Augustine is the cousin and fiancée of Auguste Landois. Augustine is La Belle Lisa's helper at the charcuterie and she is learning "shop management" (57). She and her betrothed are given the same name because they have the same godfather. Auguste and Augustine are likened to Quenu and La Belle Lisa. Augustine has a ruddy complexion and "wiry chestnut hair" (79).

Mère Méhudin

Mère Méhudin is the mother of Louise and Claire Méhudin and the grandmother of Muche. She is the original Belle Normande, her daughter Louise is the second. Mère Méhudin is a salty fishwife who has become fat and boisterous over the years. Her voice is hoarse and she is no longer as beautiful as she once was. Mère Méhudin distrusts thin people, as they appear suspicious to her. She dislikes Florent intensely and does everything she can to make his job at Les Halles unpleasant.

Logre

Logre is a hunchback who works as an auctioneer in the markets at Les Halles. Logre is also one of the individuals who, along with Florent and Gavard, plans to overthrow the French government. Logre uses his position as a supposed co-conspirator in the plot to milk Florent for substantial amounts of money. Logre is acquitted of all charges and is allowed to go free. Unbeknownst to the others in the group from Monsieur Lebigre's, Logre is a government informant and plays a significant part in Florent's capture and deportation.

Pauline Quenu

Pauline is the only child of Quenu and La Belle Lisa. She, like her parents, is plump and sleek. Pauline is a well-behaved, ladylike girl who wears petticoats and totes around her



overweight cat, Mouton. Pauline and Muche, La Belle Normande's son, are on-again off-again playmates.

Robine

Robine is another participant in the political meetings attended by Florent and Monsieur Gavard. Not much is known about Robine. No one seems to know what Robine does for a living, nor how he spends his days, but each night, like clockwork, he can be found in the back room of Monsieur Lebigre's sipping his beer and listening to Florent and the others spout invectives about the French government. Gavard claims to have visited Robine's home in the Rue Saint-Denis. Robine is approximately fifty years old and is rather nondescript in appearance. He always wears a "heavy brown overcoat" and carries a stick with an ivory handle. Robine sports a thick beard which obscures his mouth, leaving him with a "dumb, lipless" look. At no point in the narrative does Robine ever utter a word.

Léon

Léon is an apprentice who works in the Quenu-Gradelles' charcuterie. Approximately fifteen years of age, Léon is of slight build and has a gentle face. He has a penchant for stealing small bits of ham and other food from the charcuterie and secreting them away to eat in his room late at night. Léon, Marjolin and Cadine are all acquaintances. At one point, Marjolin catches Léon kissing Cadine.



Objects/Places

Le Charcuterie Quenu-Gradelle

Le Charcuterie Quenu-Gradelle is the name of the butcher shop owned originally by Florent and Quenu's uncle, Monsieur Gradelle. After his death, La Belle Lisa and Quenu take over the shop. The term "charcuterie" is sometimes mistakenly used in reference to a shop which specializes in pork only and this is not the case.

Monsieur Lebrige's café

Located not far from the charcuterie, Lebrige's café is where Florent and his friends plot to overthrow the French Empire. The café is located in the Rue Pirouette, not far from the Quenu-Gradelles' butcher shop.

Nanterres

Nanterre is another well-known suburb of Paris. Madame François lives here. Florent and Claude Lantier visit her at her home one day. It is here that Florent feels comfortable and secure. Interestingly, Madame François complains about Paris as though she lived in an entirely separate city. This may be a symptom of the division she observes between those living in Paris proper and those residing in more outlying areas.

Les Halles

The famous central marketplace in Paris, France. Les Halles is constructed in the 1850s.

Église Saint-Eustache

A Parisian cathedral located at the entrance to Les Halles. Saint-Eustache is the church where La Belle Lisa goes to consult with Father Roustan regarding her suspicions about Florent. The author spends a considerable amount of time describing various parts of the church that would have been familiar to readers in 1870s Paris.

Rue de la Cosonnerie

The street which houses a candy shop famous for its screws, "small paper packets used by grocers for the leftovers of their sweet displays" (Chapter 5, p. 201). Muche lures Pauline Quenu to the candy shop as part of his plan to debase the little girl.



Rue Royer-Collard

The Paris street on which Florent and his brother Quenu share an apartment after the death of their mother.

Devil's Island Penal Colony

Also known as "Cayenne," Devil's Island is located just off the coast of French Guiana. The first French prisoners were sent to Cayenne in 1852, just a few years prior to the publication of *The Belly of Paris*.

Le Vigan

Le Vigan is the small town in southern France where Florent and Quenu lived with their mother prior to her death.

Rue Pirouette

The Rue Pirouette is the original location of Uncle Gradelle's charcuterie. Gradelle dies in the shop, which causes a stir in the neighborhood. It also causes the shop's patrons to rethink buying their goods from the Quenus-Gradelle.

Rue Rambuteau

Following Gradelle's death in the old shop, Lisa and Quenu relocate the charcuterie to the Rue Rambuteau.

Théâtre de la Gaîté

Theater where Lisa and Quenu go to see the melodrama *La Grâce de Dieu*.

Bois de Boulogne

The Bois de Boulogne is a fashionable section of Paris frequented by middle- and upper-class patrons.

Clamart

Clamart is the Parisian suburb where Monsieur Verlaque lives.

Tuilleries

Located in Paris, the Tuilleries was a famous royal palace and once the home of Napoleon Bonaparte. Monsieur Gavard uses the term "Tuilleries" to refer to the French government as a whole.

Themes

Consumption

Consumption of goods is what drives business in Les Halles. The vast array of vegetables and fruit, meat and fish, cheese and butter are what motivate the consumerist citizens of Zola's Paris to beg, barter, sell and steal in order to meet their physical and social needs. Excess is an inescapable fact of life for Florent and those with whom he interacts. The characters, and by extension all of Parisian society, are well-established as consumers, gluttonous devourers not only of food but of one another. French society at the time the novel was written was clearly divided along the lines of class and social position. There are fat and thin people in the narrative who, according to their physical stature, are associated with one camp or the other. It is those belonging to the middle-class, the *petits-bourgeois*, who come under the critical eye of those occupying the lower social strata and the author himself. The "fat" characters are those who sell food and drink for a profit and those who administer the rules and laws. Among them are the shopkeepers: Quenu, La Belle Lisa, Monsieur Gavard, Madame Taboureau and Monsieur Lebigre. To a lesser degree, the individuals who own and work the stalls at Les Halles could also be considered as fat because they also sell. However, what distinguishes these merchants from the first group mentioned is that the vendors do not own buildings from which they sell. They sell their goods outdoors. La Belle Normande, her mother and sister as well as are vendors with stalls in the great market. They are not, however, considered members of the bourgeoisie because they lack the capital to purchase shops. The thin characters, on the other hand, are those who are truly at the mercy of the likes, dislikes and caprices of the *petits-bourgeois*. As a result of his status as an artist, Claude Lantier can be considered a thin character even though he is related to La Belle Lisa. Clémence, who works as a kind of secretary at the market, along with Charvet the teacher, Logre the hunchbacked auctioneer and Monsieur Lacaille are also thin. In terms of their life circumstances, Marjolin, Cadine and La Sarriette appear to belong to the thin camp. However, they are described by Claude Lantier as fat-people-in-training (192). Mademoiselle Saget, because of her obvious poverty (she eats the food that the aristocrats throw out) and Mère Chantemesse ("a retail dealer by trade") are also thin (153). The main protagonist, Florent, is also thin. In his case, however, thinness (in political and social terms) is a conscious choice. After he escapes from Devil's Island, Florent is determined to have his revenge on the system which wrongly imprisons him. In addition, Florent is a man of some means, thanks to his Uncle Gradelle's death. With the inheritance of forty-thousand or so francs, Florent could very well have gone into some sort of business himself. The physical hunger which begins in the penal colony is transformed into political hunger once he is exposed to life in Les Halles.

The only character featured in *The Belly of Paris* who cannot be categorically described as thin or fat is Madame François. While it is true that she sells her vegetables in the outdoor market at Les Halle, her political sensibilities set her apart from the other characters in the novel. In addition, is her status as a widow which places her in the



category of "vendor." On page 5, the character states, "Since my husband died, I've been going to the markets every morning. It's hard!" This statement supports the position that she goes to Les Halles not as a matter of choice, but of necessity. Madame François is the only character whose actions are unmotivated by her position in society or her ambitions to further her own cause or move up the ladder. Not only is she content with her life as it is, she is more than happy to share it with Florent and others. Madame François' selflessness is the redeeming quality that sets her apart from all the other characters in the narrative.

Money

Money; acquiring it, saving it, touching it, counting it and holding onto it, is a theme which is interwoven throughout the narrative of *The Belly of Paris*. Money as an entity associated with freedom and power is first presented in Chapter 1 after Uncle Gradelle dies in the charcuterie. Here, the author equates money with food by having La Belle Lisa discover Uncle Gradelle's fortune hidden at the bottom of a salting barrel. With Gradelle's money, La Belle Lisa and Quenu are able to improve their social standing by opening a new larger, more richly appointed charcuterie. Also, La Belle Lisa is said to be a wise investor. The character's ability to make her money work for her establishes La Belle Lisa as somehow slightly better than her middle-class counterparts. While characters like Gavard and Monsieur Lebigre make a satisfactory living, La Belle Lisa has cultivated the financial acumen to manipulate money so that it functions in her favor well into the future. Wealth, in La Belle Lisa's case, creates wealth. As such, Pauline will enter into adulthood a very rich young woman. In Les Halles, money drives commerce and relationships and while many of the characters are not exactly rich, each of them has his/her own singular relationship with hard, cold cash. For example, while La Belle Normande owns a stall in the outdoor market, the character still manages to earn enough money to enable her to purchase expensive jewelry, silk dresses and other fine things to wear. In addition, La Belle Normande wisely accepts Monsieur Lebigre's offer of marriage and in doing so, both man and wife are able to double their wealth. Just as Pauline Quenu is assured a truly bourgeois upbringing, so Muche (La Normande's son) also becomes a member of the moneyed class. Florent is the only exception to this assertion, as he refuses his share of the Uncle Gradelle's inheritance from the outset. What prompts Florent to part with his money is, in effect, idealism. Florent fairly throws money at the cause, giving Logre large sums in order to recruit men to fight alongside him. Florent believes in the power of money to bring about change. In this case, the change Florent has in mind is the destruction of the Empire and the subsequent implementation of a system of government which will serve the people rather than itself. In Zola's Paris, money's only purpose is to maintain the status quo.

Information as a Commodity in Les Halles

Information, specifically in the form of gossip, is a valuable commodity in the Paris neighborhood of Les Halles. What the characters know, or claim to know, about one another is what drives their actions and reactions. Mademoiselle Saget is the premier



gossip-monger of Les Halles. She makes it her business to know as much as she can about those around her. By slyly collecting and then carefully disseminating the information gathered, Mademoiselle Saget establishes herself as an important "player" in the neighborhood. Mademoiselle Saget, while not very popular among her fellow Parisians, nonetheless secures for herself a position of minor importance. The shopkeepers and stall owners know that when they see Mademoiselle Saget approaching, she is either looking to share something she has discovered, or she is in search of new fodder for the rumor mill. In either case, Mademoiselle Saget is assured to have the attention she desires. Once the information has been gathered (often from less than reliable sources), Mademoiselle Saget is able to parlay what she knows, often slanting the gossip to accommodate the situation. Mademoiselle Saget never divulges what she knows for the sake of idle chit-chat. In most instances, Mademoiselle Saget uses her gossip as currency for food to live on. In the charcuterie and the stalls of the market, a well-placed word allows Mademoiselle Saget to share what she learns in exchange for choice cuts of meat, butter, and other staples. While it is true that Mademoiselle Saget is the quintessential busybody of Les Halles, she uses La Sarriette and Madame Lecœur to spread the information around even quicker.

La Belle Lisa also collects information in order to further her own personal agenda. Dissatisfied with Florent's political activities and his supposed entanglement with her nemesis La Belle Normande, La Belle Madame Quenu sneaks into Florent's room and rifles through his private papers looking for something that will incriminate him and lead to his eventual arrest. Lisa is not at all concerned with the damage Florent might do in the political arena. She is much more intently focused maintaining her family's status quo and sees Florent as a threat to her future and the future of the charcuterie. La Belle Lisa's self-righteousness is what motivates her to turn her brother-in-law over to the authorities. Thus information, at least in La Belle Lisa's case, becomes a commodity which can be exchanged for peace of mind. It is more expedient for her to hand Florent over to the police than to toss him out into the streets of Paris to fend for himself. Additionally, by undermining Florent's plans to destroy the Empire, La Belle Lisa is then able to keep Florent's portion of Uncle Gradelle's money without feeling guilty.



Style

Point of View

The *Belly of Paris* is told from the perspective of a disinterested omniscient narrator. Given that there are so many characters presented in the novel, this seems a wise choice. By using an omniscient narrator, Zola enables the reader to follow the narrative action without needing to be concerned with whether or not the narrator's account is accurate. Since gossip and rumor-mongering play such significant roles in the novel, the reader is able to determine the characters' reliability (or lack thereof) from dialogue. The narrator in *The Belly of Paris* serves as the reader's eyes, nose and ears. This is evident in the long descriptive passages which appear regularly in the narrative. It is interesting to note that the descriptions of the various characters are not nearly as thorough or detailed as the author's descriptions of the various types of food with which Florent and those around him come into contact on a daily basis. Early on, Zola establishes Paris' Les Halles as a place which is smelled, seen, and tasted before it is talked about. Finally, by employing an omniscient narrator, Zola guarantees that the reader's sense experience is purely singular and, for the most part, beyond the influence of that of his characters.

Setting

The *Belly of Paris* is set primarily in Paris. Specifically, it is set in the section of the city known as Les Halles. Les Halles is the site of an enormous open-air market and home to numerous vendors of various foodstuffs. The author is meticulous in his mention of the streets surrounding Les Halles as well as other areas of Paris, which would have been more than familiar to readers of his day. By mentioning specific streets and intersections in and around the city of Paris, Zola's audience (then, as well as now) could map out the characters' movements in their imaginations, thus heightening the reading experience. Furthermore, Zola references the names of smaller towns and villages in the narrative. Again, by including these place names, the author exhibits a familiarity with his country as a whole. Additionally, the locations within Paris which Zola mentions are sites that would have figured prominently in the political, religious and social lives of the citizens living in late 19th century France. The author uses such places as the Bois de Boulogne, the Église Saint-Eustache, Theatre de la Gaite and the Palais de Justice, places well-known to those belonging to those members of the bourgeoisie whose lifestyle is critiqued in the narrative. Zola's inclusion of such locations as Le Vigan, in southern France, Clamart and Nanterre (both of which are located in the Paris suburbs) would have served as geographical and socio-political points of reference for Zola's working-class readers.



Language and Meaning

Since *The Belly of Paris* was originally written in French, it goes without saying that some of the language presented in the novel could prove somewhat problematic for readers who are not conversant in French. One issue associated with reading a work in translation is the possibility of gaps in meaning and significance. This is not the case with *The Belly of Paris*, however; even in translation Zola's message is more than effectively conveyed to the reader. For the most part, words which have not been translated from the French refer most often to types of food ("petit salé", for example) or political and municipal terms such as "sergents de ville" (a policeman of sorts). Also, there are a number of food names which, having been translated into English, may still be unfamiliar to readers. The fact that one reading *The Belly of Paris* in English may nonetheless encounter fruit, vegetable or seafood names which still seem foreign is a testament to the underlying theme of excess which the novel takes to task. The seemingly endless lists of innumerable familiar and unfamiliar food names are undoubtedly intended to give the reader an impression of over-satiation. This condition of being overstuffed is at the crux of Zola's view of the Parisian petit-bourgeois.

Structure

The Belly of Paris presents no surprises in terms of its narrative structure. The novel is comprised of six chapters of fairly equal length. For the most part, events in the novel unfold in straightforward chronological progression. By way of character development and in order to catch the reader up, as it were, Zola does digress within the novel on a few occasions. The first significant digression comes at the beginning of Chapter 2, in which the reader learns of Florent and Quenu's early lives. This technique is also used at the opening of Chapter 4, in which Marjolin and Cadine's relationship is chronicled. Interestingly, Florent's experiences during his time on Devil's Island are introduced by way of a story which he tells his niece Pauline. The child refers to Florent's adventure in the penal colony as "the story of the man who was eaten alive" (Chapter 3, page 79). The market at Les Halles is divided into sections according to the kind of food sold. Each time the author introduces a new part of the market to the reader, there is a lengthy description of all the variations of that type which are featured in the stalls. For example, at the beginning of his discussion of the vegetable vendors, an inventory is provided which begins on page 25. Similar inventories are given for the goods sold in the Quenu-Gradelles' charcuterie (page 34), and the fish and seafood vendors (pages 90 and 91). Also, on page 211, the novel features an impressive cheese inventory, provided during the scene in which La Sarriette, Madame Lecœur and Mademoiselle Saget gossip in the cellar below Les Halles.

Quotes

"The nine carts behind him, with their mountains of cabbages and peas, their piles of artichokes, lettuces, celery, and leeks, seemed to be rolling over him as if to bury him beneath an avalanche of food," (Chapter 1, p. 7).

"On the two side panels of the shop front, similarly painted and under glass, were chubby little Cupids playing in the midst of boars' heads, pork chops, and strings of sausages; and these still lifes, adorned with scrolls and rosettes, had been designed in so pretty and tender a style that the raw meat lying there assumed the reddish tint of raspberry jam," (Chapter 1, p. 34).

"She had the fine skin and pinky-white complexion of those who spend their lives surrounded by fat and raw meat," (Chapter 1, p. 35).

"There, on the highest tier of this temple of gluttony, amid the caul and between two bunches of purple gladioli, the altar display was crowned by a small, square fish tank with a little ornamental rockery, in which two goldfish swam in endless circles," (Chapter 1, p. 35).

"They were all bursting with health, solidly built, sleek, in prime condition; they looked at him with the surprise of fat people gripped by a vague feeling of unease at the sight of someone who is thin. Even the cat, whose skin was distended by fat, turned its round yellow eyes toward him in a glare of distrust," (Chapter 1, p. 36).

"He was falling into the state of blissful complacency created by the continuous focus on food and well-being that defined the world in which he had been living for the last two weeks," (Chapter 2, p. 89).

"Gavard hated thin women; he said he found it unpleasant to feel their bones under their skin, and would only stroke the fattest cats and dogs, taking great satisfaction in their plump, well-fed bodies," (Chapter 2, p. 60).

"A man capable of living without food for three days struck her as a highly dangerous character. Respectable people never put themselves in that position," (Chapter 2, p. 85).

"In spite of the excessive cleanliness, fat oozed everywhere; it sweated between the tiles, glistened on the red surface of the floor, put a greyish sheen on the stove, and gave a varnished appearance to the edges of the chopping block... there was not a single nail from floor to ceiling that was not dripping with grease," (Chapter 2, p. 78).

"One side of the house in which they lived overlooked the Rue Saint-Jacques, where there was a large rotisserie kept by a man called Gavard, whose wife was dying of consumption brought on by the greasy smell of poultry," (Chapter 2, p. 40).



"The tiny jet-black eyes of the prawns, in covered baskets, were like thousands of beads scattered across the piles of soft-toned pink and grey; the spiky lobsters and crayfish, striped with black and still alive, were dragging themselves about on their broken legs," (Chapter 3, p. 91).

"The kind attentions of La Belle Lisa wrapped him in a fleecy warmth that softened every part of his mind and body," (Chapter 3, p. 98).

"Her sedentary life had made her enormous, and her head was thrown back by the weight of her bust, by the rising tide of fat," (Chapter 3, p. 106).

"But Florent had always been afraid of women, and he began to feel as if he were having a nightmare in which giant women, prodigiously well endowed, were closing in on him, shouting and brandishing their prizefighters' arms," (Chapter 3, p. 110).

"In fact, Florent scarcely gave a thought to these beautiful young women. His general behaviour towards women was that of a man who had never enjoyed the least success with them. Too much of his virility was expended in dreams," (Chapter 3, p. 130).

"Florent had such a gentle nature that he lived in a world of illusion. He was afraid that he might hurt the feelings of his brother and sister-in-law if he no longer ate at their table," (Chapter 4, p. 175).

"Paris made everything rot and returned everything to the earth, which never wearied of repairing the ravages of death," (Chapter 4, p. 188)."

"She seemed like some hardy plant that had grown up with the vegetables in the fertile soil of the garden; while the Lisas, the Normandes, and all the other market women, seemed like mutton dressed up for the shop window," (Chapter 4, p. 190).

"Claude saw the entire drama of human life; and he ended by dividing everyone into Fat and Thin, two hostile groups, one of which devours the other and grows fat and sleek and endlessly enjoys itself," (Chapter 4, p. 191).

"He lowered his head as he returned once more to the nightmare of endless food, with the bitter-sweet memory of this day of health and sunlight caught in the perfume of thyme," (Chapter 4, p. 192).

"She always said that religion was essential to the great majority of people; she saw it as a kind of police force that helped to keep order and without which no government could possibly function," (Chapter 5, p. 193).

"As for Alexandre and Lacaille, they confirmed his view that 'the people' are stupid and require ten years of revolutionary dictatorship to learn how to behave," (Chapter 5, p. 230).

"He, like a deceived husband who is always the last to hear of his misfortune, lived in happy ignorance and excellent spirits as he stopped some neighbour on the footpath to



ask her how she had liked his brawn or his truffled boar's head. The neighbor would assume a rather pained expression and seemed, in her reply, to be offering him her sympathy, as if all the pork on his premises had become infected," (Chapter 5, p. 233).

"In the distance, the meat and tripe markets reeked of blood, the vegetable and fruit markets exhaled odours of sour cabbages, rotten apples, and greenery tossed out into the street; the butter and cheese gave off a dreadful stench; the smell from the fish market was acrid; while the ventilator in the tower of the poultry market just below him came a blast of hot air, a stench, that poured out like soot from a factory chimney," (Chapter 5, p. 249).

"He slammed the window shut, and left them sprawling in the darkness, naked, sweating, displaying their swollen bellies, and relieving themselves under the stars," (Chapter 5, p. 249).

"It was then that he had begun to feel faint, when he saw that great blond brute massacring the birds, stunning them with the handle of his knife and driving its point into their throats, in the foul-smelling cellar; his legs had almost given way beneath him and his eyelids quivered," (Chapter 6, pp. 253-4).

"But as the bright sunshine in the street struck him full in the face, he felt a touch of shame, and climbed into the cab with a bent back and an ashen face. He knew that the fish market was gazing at him in triumph; it seemed to him, indeed, that the whole neighbourhood had gathered to celebrate its victory," (Chapter 6, p. 270).

"Claude shook his fist at them. He was exasperated by all this joyousness in the streets and on the rooftops. He cursed the Fat people, for they had won. All around he could see nothing but Fat people, increasing in size, bursting with health, greeting another day of eating and digesting," (Chapter 6, p. 274).

"She exhibited the deep calm of repletion, a massive tranquility unruffled even by a smile," (Chapter 6, p. 275).

"The great strips of bacon and the sides of pork that hung against the marble brought to the picture the rounded contours of the belly, the belly triumphant, while Lisa, standing there, motionless and imposing, greeted Les Halles with her large, well-fed face," (Chapter 6, p. 275).



Topics for Discussion

Re-read Zola's description of the Quenus' bedroom on page 53. What is meant by the narrator's assertion that "it was truly a bed intended for sleep"? What does the statement say about the nature of Quenu's relationship with Lisa?

Identify the characters in the novel that are identified as "Fat" and "Thin." Explain the assertion on page 274 that the "Fat" people had won. What did they win? What was at stake?

Analyze the role that gossip plays in Florent's eventual undoing, specifically addressing the characters of Mademoiselle Saget, Madame Lecoeur, and La Sarriette. Use textual examples to substantiate the claims being made.

Explain the ways in which the markets of Les Halles serve as an example of a consumerist society. Cite examples from the narrative to reinforce your argument.

The character known as Robine has no dialogue in the narrative and yet he plays an integral role in the goings-on at Monsieur Lebigre's establishment. Using specific examples from the novel, explain why is Robine such an important figure and discuss his contribution to Florent's downfall.

Reference examples in the narrative that support or refute Brian Nelson's claim in the Introduction that Marjolin and Cadine provide a contrast to Quenu and Lisa's "model of bourgeois respectability" (xvii). Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? If so, why? If not, why not?

Discuss the relationship between Pauline Quenu and Muche as it parallels the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the lower classes in *The Belly of Paris*.

In what way(s) does Madame François establish herself as a neutral character in the conflict between "Fat" and "Thin" in *The Belly of Paris*?

Given the subject of *The Belly of Paris*, discuss the irony of Florent's step-father dying of indigestion and Monsieur Gavard's wife as a result of the smell of chicken grease.

Discuss the following statement: "[Lisa] looked so healthy and self-assured that it was impossible to imagine that she meant any harm. It was he—thin, sickly, suspect—who must be in the wrong," (Chapter 2, p. 89).

On page 191, what does Claude Lantier mean when he says that Monsieur Gavard is a Fat person who "pretends to be Thin"? What is Claude saying about Monsieur Gavard's political stance?

At several points during the narrative, Zola launches into elaborate lists and descriptions of different types of food. Identify two or three of these passages and explain the



author's use of excess as a means of critiquing the French government of the late 19th century.

In what way is Muche's betrayal of Pauline Quenu a victory of "Thin" over "Fat"? What is the boy's motivation for wanting Pauline to get so very dirty?

What is it that prompts La Belle Normande to want to marry Florent? When Florent is captured, why does she then consent to marry Monsieur Lebigre? What does La Belle Normande gain in her marriage to a "Fat" man?

Compare and contrast Florent and his younger brother Quenu from the standpoint of their physical bodies as representations of their political and ideological beliefs.