

Germinal Study Guide

Germinal by Émile Zola

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Plot Summary

Germinal starts when a young man by the name of Etienne Lantier arrives on foot at the Voreux pit. He is around 21-years-old, skinny but strong looking. He is greeted by a 58-year-old man nicknamed Bonnemort. The man tells him that there is no work for a mechanic in the mine. Bonnemort lives in the Village Two Hundred and Forty along with his son Maheu, Maheu's wife, and their seven children. Etienne Lantier finds work in the mine as a hewer and is integrated with the mining team that includes Maheu, Chaval and Catherine. Lantier immediately likes Catherine but Chaval sees nothing in Lantier but a competitor and a stranger who will steal the miners' salary. Two supervisors show up and after a quick inspection, they impose a fine on the team for faulty timbering. Maheu decides that the day is lost and that it is time for the team to go back home. Etienne follows the advice of some of his coworkers and rents a room at The Advantage, an Inn managed by Rasseneur. Etienne Lantier goes out for a walk and witnesses the rape of Catherine but doesn't intervene.

Etienne Lantier becomes a good hewer and meets Souvarine, a Russian anarchist. Joined by Rasseneur, the men hold long discussions concerning the future of the workers. After consulting with his friend Pluchart, Etienne Lantier creates a new local division of the "International" and moves in with the Maheus. On a payday in October, the mining company disguises a lowering of the salaries as a new mode of payment. The miners take offense as it adds insult to injury and decide to strike as the working conditions deteriorate quickly. Chaval is getting extremely jealous of the relationship between Catherine Maheu and Etienne Lantier. He takes her away to work at Jean-Bart, an independent coalmine. On December 15, the miners go on strike. A delegation led by Maheu meets with the mine director and demands a just mode of payment and bread everyday, but nothing is solved. The strike spreads and most of the Company's mines are stopped. Only Jean-Bart's miners, which is an independent mine, continue to work. The miners join the International. The company proves inflexible but the miners are determined to win.

The owner of Jean-Bart and Chaval manage to avoid a strike, but the strikers of the Montsou Company demolish the installations of the independent mine. The miners on strike march toward Montsou. They assault the mine's director house and nearly kill Cecile, the daughter of one of the mine's investors. The mob then assaults the local grocer's store and mutilates the grocer's dead body. In early February, the army is occupying Montsou. One of Maheu's children kills a young soldier and hides him under rocks. The striking miners face the armed soldiers at the mining pit and try to push them back. The armed guards fire and 14 miners end up dead. The miners put an end to the strike, but Souvarine proceeds to sabotage the mining pit. Water floods the mine and Chaval, Lantier and Catherine are trapped in the imploded mine while the rescue workers start to dig for possible survivors. Cecile is strangled by Bonnemort. Lantier kills Chaval, and after nine days, the two remaining lovers make love. Catherine dies soon afterward from exhaustion and after a few days, Etienne is rescued on the brink of starvation. He recovers in the hospital and leaves the mine behind him to go to Paris.



Part I: Chapter 1-6

Part I: Chapter 1-6 Summary

Germinal is an important novel about work relationships and political movements. It was written at the end of the nineteenth century by Emile Zola, a prolific French writer of the era; it soon became a classic text everywhere around the world. The author spent nearly a year studying the world of the miners and the mechanics of social conflicts that were plaguing Europe in the middle of that century. Zola succeeded in presenting the many points of view that surface when social conflict erupts. Despite the novel being over 100 years old, many of the political situations that are described in *Germinal* are still at play in the contemporary world. Aside from being one of the best novels ever written, it is also an excellent example of what Zola christened the 'naturalist' movement in literature.

Germinal starts on a Monday of February 1865, in the middle of the night. A young man named Etienne Lantier arrives on foot at the Voreux mining pit from Marchiennes, a town located a few kilometers away. He is around 21 years old, skinny but strong-looking. He is a mechanic who has been fired from his job at the railroad for hitting his supervisor; he has been out of work for a while. He is greeted by a 58 years old man named Bonnemort (Vincent Maheu). The man tells him that there is no work for a mechanic in the mine. A conversation follows and Bonnemort tells him about what it is like to work in the mine. Bonnemort keeps coughing and spitting coal-colored phlegm while he talks and says he started to work in the mine at age 8 and hasn't stopped since. Having worked for 45 years underground, he is now sick and disabled; for this reason, he cannot work inside the Voreux anymore. Though he could technically retire, he is delaying it for two more years in order to earn 30 more francs yearly. Since he is unable to work underground, the company assigned him to work as a carter. He describes the area by pointing to the various landmarks that surround the mining pit, but in the darkness Etienne Lantier can't see anything.

This mining settlement is just waking up. The "Two Hundred and Forty" is inhabited by miners and all the houses are attributed by the mining company. Bonnemort, who lives in house number sixteen on the second block, is the elder of the Maheu family. He lives with his son, who goes simply by the name of Maheu, along with the latter's wife and their seven children. The wife goes by the name of La Maheude, and their children are named Zacharie, Catherine, Jeanlin, Alzire, Henri, Lenore and Estelle. The family goes about its usual arguments and gossips as both parents and their two eldest children are getting ready to go to work. Soon the miners of the settlement leave their home behind them and walk in the cold and dark morning toward the mine.

After talking to Danseart, the overman, Etienne Lantier manages to get hired as a hewer. His job is to go underground and mine the coal ore using a pick; the ore can then be loaded in the cars and carried to the surface. He lines up with the other men and women, waiting to be carried down the mineshaft in a metal cage. He is integrated with



the team that includes Maheu and Chaval. The team goes down the shaft and walks for a long time along the dark corridors of the mine. Lantier gets to know Catherine a little bit more, since he previously mistook her for a man. The relationship between Chaval and Lantier starts on the wrong foot; the two men look at each other with a fire lit by an instinctive and mutual mistrust in their eyes. Chaval sees nothing in Lantier but a stranger who will steal the miners' salary... and a potential contender for the love of Catherine.

The team starts its hard work. Catherine gives Lantier a lot of precious advice, and Etienne slowly works on building his friendship with her and plans on kissing her later. He tells her that he was fired from his previous job for the railway after he slapped his supervisor. He also admits that he is suffering from hereditary alcoholism, which has plagued his family for generations. Chaval notices the relationship that Lantier is trying to establish and becomes jealous. He slips between the two of them and kisses Catherine just as Lantier was about to do the same, a move with freezes Etienne. Catherine then shows Lantier the firedamp sources and they continue to work under the intense heat and humidity of the mine.

While working, the members of the mining team discuss their conditions and in doing so, they criticize their supervisors. They say that the latter are too hard on them and that they keep forcing them to pay penalties for minor and inconsequential breaches of rules. During that conversation, two of these supervisors show up: Negrel and Dansaert. Negrel is a young engineer and Dansaert is an overman (the manager of operations). After a quick inspection, the duo tells the team that they have to pay a 3-francs fine for faulty timbering. They add that some new measures will soon be in place that will effectively reduce their pay. The workers are lowering a new horse named Trumpet down the shaft. The horse will be a companion to Battle, a white horse with ten years of service. The new horse is terrified of his new environment and will not move. Mouquette's father is taking care of the work animals. Maheu decides that the day is lost and that it is time for the team to go back home.

Once back on the surface, the workers split. Etienne follows the advice of some of his coworkers and rents a room at The Advantage, a public house managed by the Rasseneurs. The Advantage is the name of a tavern located between the Voreux and the Village Two Hundred and Forty. The tavern appears to be where everyone who is unsatisfied with its working condition goes to talk and exchange ideas with similar minded people; it is a place that brews a lot of political activity. After listening to a conversation between Rasseneur and some miners, Lantier mentions that he personally knows Pluchart, the head of the International Workingmen's Association for the department; he used to have long friendly chats with him when Pluchart was his foreman at the railway company. His relationship with Pluchart earns him a friendly attitude from the Innkeeper. Later, standing outside the tavern, Lantier takes a long look at the landscape surrounding the mining pit and the long canal that draws a line from the Voreux to Marchiennes, the closest town. The young man wonders if he is drawn to work in the heart of the mine by Catherine's green eyes, or simply because he wants to be a part of the poor people who give their life to a company with no face.



Part I: Chapter 1-6 Analysis

In the first part of *Germinal*, the author uses six chapters to set the scene, to establish the geography of the area where the events will take place, and finally to introduce the different characters that will be involved in the story. This introduction part is divided in 6 chapters, each of which read like short portraits painted from different angles.

Zola uses a writing style and a combination of techniques that are equivalent to the painting style and techniques of the late nineteenth century impressionists. In the first chapter, everything is set in the dark of night; the only lighting is provided either by the moonlight or by the fire burning inside the chunks of coal. The objects and places described by the characters are just shadows in the night extending over a world already darkened by the coal dust; the things that Bonnemort describes remain invisible, even though he points to it as if they could be seen.

The first chapter also introduces the "monster," which is the huge cone-like structure set over the pit. It is described as a beast ready to eat the men that slave for it. This representation of the coal mine as hell remains a constant throughout the novel. The Voreux is an inescapable Satan that the miners are condemned to serve; in the fires of hell, it consumes the miners slowly by burning them from the inside. The author surrounds the story and its characters with an aura of fatality that never disappears.

The setting of the later chapters is also quite dark, as the author chooses to turn the lights slowly on in the world of the miners. Work starts before sunlight and the underground workers are performing their duties in an extremely hot and humid half-lit environment, where the only sources of light are the Davy lamps carried by the miners.

In the novel, Lantier is looking for a job and is ready to take on anything that the mine has to offer. He is starving and his only choice is between death and slavery, so he opts for the latter. By his own admission, Bonnemort has been slaving for the mine since he was eight years old; worse, he will be slaving for it for two more years, even though he is disabled and dying from all the coal dust he inhaled during his lifetime - all this for a mere 30 francs a year.



Part II: Chapter 1-5

Part II: Chapter 1-5 Summary

Leon Gregoire is an important investor in the mining company that owns the Voreux mining pit. He lives comfortably in a cozy house, two kilometers east of Montsou, with his wife, his daughter and a maid. All his revenues derive from an investment in the mining company made by his grandfather a century earlier. Deneulin, a cousin in the same branch of the family, also inherited from their common ancestor's investment. However, the latter invested all his money in revamping and modernizing the Jean-Bart mine. The latter does not bring him any new revenue and he ends up trying to borrow some funds from the Gregoires. However, they refuse to lend any money to their cousin; instead, they advise him to sell the mine to the company and to stop worrying about it.

Back in the mining settlement, La Maheude finds that she cannot feed everyone with the revenues that the family earns by working in the mine. Since she exhausted her credit with the local grocer, she gathers her courage and decides to go ask the Gregoires for help. The shareholders sympathize with her situation but in keeping with their principles, they refuse to give her any money and instead offer her some clothes to distribute to her children. La Maheude returns to the grocer and begs him to help. The grocer agrees, but only if Catherine comes to the store.

In the Village Two Hundred and Forty settlement, the gossips are running wild. The relationships and private little affairs of everyone are rapidly turned into a public subject of discussion. In this chapter, the author introduces the daily life of the other families living in the village. Mrs. Hennebeau, the wife of the Voreux's director, treats her friends from Paris to a visit of the settlement. The miners are presented like animals on display in a zoo. The visit does not help the miners' cause in any way; it only makes them drool at the sight of those well-dressed, well-fed citizens of the city.

Once the visitors are gone, the miners go back to their daily business. They have to cook, send the children to bed, etc. It's a night like every other night for the Maheu family, where nothing is ever particularly joyful.

After eating his meal at the tavern where he is staying, Etienne Lantier goes out for a walk in order to try and quiet down an annoying headache. He walks toward the Village Two Hundred and Forty, where the end of the day means that its population of washed-up workers is quickly falling asleep. The night is very quiet and Lantier walks away from the settlement. Suddenly, he hears the voices of Chaval and Catherine. He watches them for a while. The conversation between the two turns difficult and Lantier witnesses Chaval rape Catherine. This act of sexual violence seals the fate of Catherine as Chaval's mistress. Unable to intervene, Lantier is enraged and feels that if the conditions were different, he would have killed the man without the slightest hesitation.



Part II: Chapter 1-5 Analysis

This second series of chapters starts by looking at the situation from the 'bourgeois' point of view. Leon Gregoire is a good man whose comfortable lifestyle depends on the mine. He is married to a woman who thinks just like him and they have no marital problems. The family inhabits a cozy house located near Montsou. Gregoire represents the typical bourgeois of the nineteenth century, as all his revenues were inherited and his only concern it to keep the investment profitable so that he can continue to live comfortably.

His cousin Deneulin represents the independent capitalist bourgeois; a man who is using his inheritance to invest on his own. He re-opened a coal mine and invested in new installations. However, he lacks the management skills necessary to run a business and his mine is running into serious liquidity trouble. Using these examples, the author shows that there is a deep division in the handling of the capital, even on the eve of the industrialization era. The old aristocratic tradition, represented by Gregoire, tends to use the capital wisely and in a moderate fashion while minimizing the work necessary to make it grow; the new capitalistic trend, represented by Deneulin, is putting the capital to work with the intent of maximizing its profit. Gregoire is a passive investor who relies on the company to manage his money, while Deneulin is an active capitalist whose individualism will ultimately make him a target for the angry mob. In the world of *Germinal*, traditions ultimately win and any kind of revolt, including the capitalist type, is bound to end up in a disaster.

The principles of the compassionate bourgeoisie are shown in the second chapter, where La Maheude decides to go ask the Gregoires for help in feeding her children. Leon Gregoire acts solely on the old principles of the aristocracy and refuses to give the starving woman any money, reasoning that the money will probably be spent on useless things such as alcohol instead of food and thus will not do anything to help the situation. Instead the Gregoires offer La Maheude clothes for her children. This episode is an example of the logic of the aristocratic capitalist, as it mirrors their refusal to lend their own cousin any money in the previous chapter.

In the third chapter, several 'bourgeois' pay a visit to the population of the settlement. The visitors are individuals related to investors in the Montsou Mining Company and otherwise wealthy people coming from Paris to see what their money was spent for. They were led through the village by the wife of the Voreux's manager, Mr. Hennebeau.

Both the visitors and the visited keep to the rules of politeness and mutual respect, even though these rules are perfectly hypocritical and serve no one's goal.

"What lovely children!" the lady in the fur coat said softly, while thinking them perfectly frightful with their excessively large heads and their mops of straw-coloured hair."

Even Bonnemort decides that he should go outside to cough in order to avoid scaring the visitors with his coal-colored phlegm.



The weight of long established traditions weights in again when Chaval asserts his dominance over Catherine. Chaval takes her virginity, which means that he now owns her. The man does not love her or even show any sign of emotional attachment at any point; he just wants to have her as a possession. From that moment on, Lantier knows that the young girl's fate is sealed and that there isn't much he can do about it, except by getting rid of Chaval. However, in this animal world of theirs, the only way to get rid of a man as an obstacle is to kill him. In a way, Chaval's fate gets sealed at the same time as he is taking possession of Catherine.



Part III: Chapter 1-5

Part III: Chapter 1-5 Summary

As time goes by and with a lot of help and advice from Catherine, Etienne Lantier becomes a good and respected hewer. Their friendship solidifies, despite the events of the first days of Lantier's career. While he stays at The Advantage, Etienne meets with Souvarine, a Russian anarchist who has taken refuge at the tavern of Rasseneur. The three men hold long discussions concerning the future of the workers. Souvarine is an extremist; he pleads that the only solution to the political problems of the working class is through total destruction of everything.

After consulting with his friend Pluchart, Etienne Lantier creates a new local division of the "International". During the celebration of the Ducasse (a local tradition in the north of France), Lantier tries to convince the workers to join along and help him fight capitalism. He suggests that the workers create a provident fund, which would help them to resist longer in case of a strike. Maheu is easily convinced, but the other miners have some problems with his projects. A few miners join in, including Chaval. Etienne concludes that there is only one thing that gives him hope: that they will sweep away the bourgeois.

In August, the oldest of the Maheus, Zacharie, gets married. This frees up some room in the family house and Lantier is invited to take Zacharie's place and live with the rest of the family. From the moment he moved in with the Maheus, he spends even more time with Catherine. The strong relationship he already had with the girl changes into an even stronger desire on both sides, but nothing happens. At work, Etienne's reputation grows a little more each day. He is recognized as an educated person with great capabilities and knowledge. His provident fund is now real, and it is growing almost as fast as the worker's discontent.

On a pay day in October, the mining company disguises a lowering of the salaries as a new mode of payment. The miners take offense as they feel the move and its motive add insult to injury. To the employees, things have gone too far. To make matters even worse, Maheu gets scolded for housing a new tenant (Etienne Lantier). The cup is full and about to overflow; the miners have to take action. That night at The Advantage, the miners decide that the company will get what they are looking for: a strike.

Despite the employees' decision to go on strike, work goes on in the mine. However, the working conditions deteriorate quickly and tensions arise everywhere. In November, an accident occurs in the mine and several workers are hurt; one of them dies and Jeanlin, one of Maheu's children, ends up crippled. While all this is going on, Chaval is getting extremely jealous of the relationship that is developing between Catherine Maheu and Etienne Lantier. He takes her away as they go to work at the Jean-Bart coal pit. Lantier is growing desperate of the situation around him, as well as the growing poverty of the Maheu family. He decides that the time has come to act.



Part III: Chapter 1-5 Analysis

The third section of the novel draws a portrait of the events that led the miners to go on strike. It also shows the evolution of Etienne Lantier's political ideas and the strategy he employed in order to convince the miners to unite against the company that exploits them. During the first few months, he was "bursting with generous indignation and eagerly espousing the prospect of imminent triumph for the oppressed." But this indignation morphed into a definite plan for action after Lantier meets with Souvarine, another resident of Rasseneur's Advantage. Souvarine represents the political extremist. He is an anarchist who does not believe in organized resistance or passive action. He is convinced that only violence and terrorism can bring about changes and force people to find solutions to inequalities, oppression and all the other problems plaguing human societies. Lantier does not subscribe to the anarchist option, but he does not believe that the political restraint and conciliatory attitude of Rasseneur will lead to a solution anytime soon either. Instinctively, he chooses a middle ground between the two attitudes.

During a local fair called 'ducasse,' most miners get together to drink and have fun. Etienne uses the occasion to put together his first plan of action. He creates a local division of the International; he also manages to convince several workers, including his archenemy Chaval, to join in and contribute to a provident fund. This is the first step in a chain of political moves that will eventually push Lantier to the forefront of the miner's movement.

The author uses the environment to underline the symbolic value of Etienne Lantier's move from timid indignation to effective political action. For instance, Lantier and his supporters decide to leave the tavern of the Rasseneurs and move to another meeting place because the former serves "warm beer" and "bad soup." This change of location corresponds to a shift in the political opinions of Etienne and his followers; they determine that the political views of the innkeepers are stale and inefficient, just as the soup and beer is. Their hope for a brighter situation starts with the creation of the provident fund and explodes during a fair day, when everything around them seems a lot more joyful. Etienne is further encouraged when he can finally move in with the Maheus and get closer to Catherine; as usual, his relationship with the girl follows the success (and later, defeat) of his ideas in the real world.

The departure of Catherine to Montsou with Chaval is taken as a challenge to the strong family values that the Maheu maintain. In the world of *Germinal*, family values impose very few limits on the sexual life of the children. On the other end, the members of a family are seen as an economic value, and thus the Maheu parents see their own daughter as a traitor to those values, since she is robbing them of an essential economic resource. In a world where women and men are equal when it comes to facing the hardship of work and social responsibilities, the parents never considered that their daughter has been stolen from them by an individual who is using the traditional values to his own advantage. Thus they blame Catherine, a fifteen year-old woman, instead of Chaval, for this problem.



Part IV: Chapter 1-7

Part IV: Chapter 1-7 Summary

On December 15, a day the Hennebeaus are hosting a social event for their friends, the miners go on strike. The workers end up chanting and demonstrating in front the mine director's house while their party begins. The wife of the director acts as though all this activity doesn't really concern any of them, but the miners are really having an effect on the guests and the meal is somewhat awkward. The workers demand to meet with the director; Hennebeau agrees to meet a delegation of miners.

A delegation is formed with members chosen during a meeting at Rasseneur's place. The delegation is welcomed with a bit of irony by the host, as Hennebeau tells them that he heard they were rebelling. Maheu takes the lead and ask for justice and for bread every day. He also complains about the injustice inherent to the new system of payment. He ads that he wants the director to know that no miner will return to work until things are back to what they were before and salaries are raised. The director promises that he will talk about it with his superiors.

Little by little, the strike spreads to other mines belonging to the company and most of their mines are stopped. Only the miners of Jean-Bart, which is independent, continue to work. By the end of December, the preventive fund set up by Lantier is already exhausted and the company does not seem to be about to give in to the worker's demands. Etienne Lantier is full of energy and strengthens his position as a leader, even though he knows that this puts a lot of responsibility on his shoulders.

Catherine, who had not been seen since her departure with Chaval, walks into her family house to offer provisions. She sees that the poverty is getting worse for her family but she says that since work continues at Jean-Bart, she is able to help. Chaval, who had been following her, comes in behind her; a fight erupts between him and Lantier, with threats erupting from both sides.

Etienne Lantier sets up a meeting in order for the miners to decide on the path to follow. He counts on the presence of Pluchart, as he expects to ask the International for help and support for the strike. During the meeting, Lantier is criticized; some members of the community think that he is only interested by power. The police are about to break in and dissolve the meeting; Lantier and Pluchart manage to convince the last miners to join the association before the meeting has to be cut short. In the end, Etienne Lantier wins his bet and the ten thousand miners of Montsou join the International.

In January 1866, the situation is getting worse for the miners and their families. Poverty is increasing and the frigid temperatures are making things even worse; everyone is hungry and cold. In order to speed up the process, Etienne and a few delegates decide to meet with Hennebeau. The latter proves inflexible and makes only minor concessions. The meeting is a disaster. The women try their best to convince the



grocer, Maigrat, to help by giving them some credit until the end of the conflict, but to no avail; the man is inflexible. Poverty is at its worst in the settlements, yet the miners are determined to win their case. They want to settle their business with the traitors, namely the miners of Jean-Bart. For this purpose, they organize a meeting in the forest, as it is now impossible to hold meetings in public places.

Many of the miners' kids are roaming the region, looking for activities that will feed them. Jeanlin Maheu, Lydie and Bebert can usually be found together, planning new tricks that will fill their stomachs. One evening, Etienne notices that Jeanlin disappeared underground through a hidden hole. He follows him and discovers that the kid has built an oasis for himself in an unused part of the mine.

The miners decide to hold their clandestine meeting in a recently opened glade called the Plan-des-Dames. During the meeting, no one listens to Chaval and the moderate Rasseneur is not interesting anymore. Etienne Lantier is the uncontested leader of the striking miners. The other miners are following the young man and they openly share his opinions. Together, they decide to renew the strike and to go to the Jean-Bart pit, where miners are still working, and devastate the installations of the traitors. Chaval tries desperately to gain a bit of popularity by telling the angry crowd to come to Jean-Bart and see for themselves whether or not he is working.

Part IV: Chapter 1-7 Analysis

The fourth part of the novel outlines the positions of the two camps involved in the growing conflict - the miners and the Company's representatives. Initially, the miners thought that the strike would only last a few days. As soon as the strike starts, the miners walk to Montsou to confront the mine's director. However, at the home of Hennebeaus, a social party is about to start; the miners' noisy gathering is considered just an inconvenience that will have no consequences. The Hennebeaus don't feel any guilt or even responsibilities toward the miners. As an upset Mr. Gregoire states:

"Of course, I'm not saying there aren't shareholders who abuse their position [...] But what about the rest of us who lead quiet lives like the good, decent people we are, who don't speculate, who live soberly and make do with what we've got and give our fair share to the poor!... Go on with you! The workers would need to be proper thieves to steal so much as a pin from us!"

Gregoire summarizes the entire position of the typical bourgeois. In doing so, he also points to what he sees as the real problem, which is that the "poor" have the same vices as the those in the company who abuse their positions: they are not content with what they have and they do not live soberly. To the bourgeois, both ends of the chain are thieves trying to steal their wealth. In observing the situation from this angle, the man obviously disregards the heart of the conflict itself, but then again it is not a concern of his because he washed his hands of any involvement at the managerial level. When the mine director later confronts Maheu and the representatives of the miners, he replies with a similar stance and insists that he does not make any of the decisions; he will talk



to his superiors about their problem. As much as these superiors remain nameless, his promise has no consequence and the conflict stalls.

The miners live in absolute poverty even when they work; the strike only makes matters worse. Yet "[t]hey had been promised the new dawn of justice, and so they were ready to suffer in the pursuit of universal happiness." They continue to address the Company as an ethereal, nameless entity that has to be brought down.

Pluchart, Lantier's friend and the director of the International for the district, represents the unions and their self-serving attitude. During the only meeting in which he participates, he keeps referring to the miners in generic terms - "comrades," "citizens" - and seems only to care that they sign in with the International.

"He delivered his set speech on how marvelous the International was and the benefits it could provide [...] He explained how its aim was the emancipation of the workers, and he described its grandiose structure, with the commune at the bottom, then the province, above that the nation, and lastly, at the very summit, humanity in general. His arms moved slowly through the air, piling level upon level and constructing the vast cathedral of the future."

The miners end up signing up, yet the organization itself does not appear to play a role in supporting the members when the strike extends for months. To the miners of Montsou, the cathedral was built in some remote part of the world and its doors are shut.



Part V: Chapter 1-6

Part V: Chapter 1-6 Summary

Deneulin, the owner of the Jean-Bart mine, learns that his miners are about to go on strike and tries desperately to convince them not to. He knows that if a strike erupts, then the mining company of Montsou will eat his mine. In order to avoid such a disastrous outcome, Deneulin manages to convince Chaval to lead the way and stop the strike. Chaval is a selfish and power hungry character who will not hesitate to betray his co-workers. He manages to put an end to the rebellion of the Jean-Bart workers, thus betraying Lantier and the miners of Montsou.

Shortly after work starts at the Jean-Bart pit, a firedamp causes an explosion that knocks Catherine out. Chaval is scared for the girl's life and shows some emotions towards her. Soon afterward, the mine gets attacked and the workers start to relay the news: the miners of Montsou are cutting the cable; everyone must get out immediately. The only way out is through the safety ladders, but the crowd of miners makes the escape route very difficult. A lot of workers fight and shout along the way. However, everyone makes it safely to the surface. Once outside, the miners find themselves in the middle of a loud and angry crowd: the Montsou miners are waiting for them and the situation is quite tense.

Who cut the cables, and why? Chaval had promised the miners of Montsou that the workers of Jean-Bart would join them. However, that did not happen and Etienne remains very skeptical about Chaval's intentions. Along with 300 of his co-workers, he walks toward Jean-Bart. They quickly realize that they have been betrayed by the miners of Jean-Bart, all this under the leadership of his arch-rival, Chaval. Lantier tries to convince Deneulin that work has to stop everywhere in order for the strike to be effective. Deneulin refuses to take his miners back to the surface; the crowd is getting angrier by the minute. Lantier tries to negotiate, but it is too late, as the excited miners start their assault on the installation of the mine. The mine is quickly disabled and Jean-Bart now belongs to the Montsou miners. Deneulin's life is saved from the angry mob by Lantier, whose pacifist principles manage to convince the striking miners to spare him. The angry mob wants to demolish the installations and cutting the cable is seen as a necessary step. However, since they don't want anyone to die, they leave the ladders untouched. The mob gets to work and in a matter of minutes, everything is destroyed; working at Jean-Bart becomes impossible.

Once the traitors are back on the surface, the miners of the Montsou Company line up along the exit to force the Jean-Bart miners to pass before them in shame. Chaval is scared to death. The miners then decide to walk to the other mining pits belonging to the company; they bring Chaval and Catherine with them, as symbols of their growing power.



The crowd of miners is now going from one pit to the other, driven by a powerful and destructive energy. At the Mirou pit, they try to force the few miners who went down to get out. Their efforts prove unsuccessful. From Mirou, they go to Madeleine, Victoire, Feutry-Cantel with the same goals. However, the striking workers remain scared of the potential force of the police and the soldiers; in the end, they destroy but a few installations along the way.

Lantier and Chaval argue and start to fight, but Catherine's intervention avoids a drama. The miners then walk toward the Montsou mining company headquarters, in the hope of getting some bread.

Hennebeau finds out that his wife is cheating on him just as the miners are at his door. The crowd is requesting bread quite loudly, but the director has other problems to worry about. During this time, Mrs. Hennebeau was strolling in the countryside along with her daughter Cecile and Negrel, her lover. They cross paths with the angry crowd of strikers and hide in a barn. The crowd is so big that they believe a revolution has just started.

The siege of the Hennebeaus' house has begun. Rocks fly in the middle of spitting insults. The Gregoires make it to the house without much trouble, just as the ramblers are coming home in their fancy horse-drawn carriage. The miners assault the vehicle and Cecile is engulfed by the crowd, insulted and humiliated. Bonnemort and La Brulee, who are part of the mob, are getting physical with the young lady, but Deneulin intervenes just in time to save her life.

Etienne Lantier tries his best to cool down the emotions of the crowd; he directs them toward the grocery store of Maigrat, the man who so often refused to help the families of the settlement. The hungry miners quickly surround and assault the store; they start to destroy the business and steal everything they can. Maigrat tries to escape by climbing on the roof. He slips and falls; he is killed instantly. The women of the Voreux are relieved, as justice has finally been served and the man will not be able to abuse those who could not afford his goods. They mutilate his body and take his genitals, which they brandish as a sign of victory on top of a pike. Then the crowd disperses quickly as the policemen approach.

Part V: Chapter 1-6 Analysis

Deneulin is a character that represents the typical independent, entrepreneurial capitalist. His individuality defies the rules established by the typical bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century. Like his cousin Leon Gregoire, Deneulin inherited a part of his ancestor's investment in the Montsou mines. However, instead of leaving his money in the company's hands to profit, he invested in a separate mining pit and used his inheritance money to revamp the mining installations of Jean-Bart. However, Deneulin lacks the skills necessary to manage his investment properly. His cousin refuses to lend him any money to keep his mine going. During the strike, Deneulin gets Chaval to help him convince the miners to work and prevent the strike from spreading to Jean-Bart. The striking miners of the Montsou Company consider the Jean-Bart miners' refusal to



follow the strike treason. Deneulin's refusal to bring his miners to the surface is a death warrant for his mine as the striking miners destroy his installation, an act which ultimately forces Deneulin to go bankrupt and to sell his mine to the Montsou Company.

In *Germinal*, there is a constant struggle between individualism and collectivism. For instance, the main character, Etienne Lantier, is torn between his individuality - his relationship with Catherine - and his taste for collectivism. During the strike, he renounces his individuality in order to be part of the 'comrades' that fight the company together. In doing so, he loses himself as a self-defined character, just as he loses Catherine. This is underlined by Catherine leaving. This collectivism is shared by all the miners. A growing group of miners go from one mining pit to the other to try and force the other mines to close their operations. Collectivism is contagious and requires everyone to join in. Deneulin's inability to understand this simple fact doomed his personal fortune, which he had totally invested in his mine. As the miners march toward Montsou, their numbers grow; the more they grow, the more they feel certain of their success.

This anticipated success leads the striking miners to commit acts that they would not have the strength to perform individually. They nearly killed Cecile Gregoire, an innocent girl who cannot possibly understand the mob's resentment towards her class. In a show of revenge, they mutilate the body of the capitalist merchant who constantly refused to help them during the crisis and constantly abused his economic privileges by asking for sexual favors in return for credit. However, the triumphs of collectivism are short lived and their assurance follows the path of their deteriorating conditions of living.



Part VI: Chapter 1-5

Part VI: Chapter 1-5 Summary

In early February, the cold winter makes it virtually impossible for the starving miners to last much longer. The army is now occupying Montsou. Still the strike goes on and the miners are resisting the urge to go back to work. However, the tension is extremely high and Lantier chooses to hide to avoid the angry miners, the same men and women who followed him when the conflict started. He finds shelter in Jeanlin's burrow. He soon realizes that life in hiding is quite difficult, specially without seeing the light of day. Etienne Lantier now believes that the police are convinced that he has left the area, so he steps out of his hiding place. He meets with Jules, a young soldier, and starts to chat. He learns about the young man's history, his family and his wish to go back to his country. Etienne talks about his own childhood in Provence.

It is snowing in Montsou. Life in the Maheus' house is desperate to say the least. The family has nothing to eat and no coal to heat their lodge; it feels like death is at their doorstep. Alzire is doing rather badly. A priest comes to visit them and tries to strengthen their faith, but the Maheus are wondering why God would want them dead. The priest is unable to convince them to attend church. Lantier pays them a visit and learns that Maheu has been officially fired. The next morning, the doctor records the death of Alzire.

The company announces that work will start at the Voreux. Negrel, the engineer, should be back soon with a team of Belgian workers. Etienne Lantier is spending more and more time outside his burrow. He goes to the Advantage where he meets with Rasseneur, who continues to find the strike useless and absurd. The men spend time discussing their respective opinions of the miners' situation. Chaval, accompanied by Catherine, walks in the Advantage. Chaval announces that he will start to work at the Voreux on the following day as the leader of a team of twelve Belgian workers. Etienne Lantier is shocked and starts a fight with Chaval. Lantier has the advantage but decides to leave Chaval alive.

After the fight, Etienne and Catherine take a walk outside the Advantage. Etienne asks her to move in with him, but she refuses and the couple splits. Lantier then sees Jeanlin lurking around the young sentinel. Filled with emotions, Etienne is unable to react when Jeanlin jumps on the soldier and drives a knife into his throat, killing the poor soldier. Jeanlin simply explains that he just felt like doing it, without any other justification. Jeanlin and Etienne decide to hide the corpse under rocks, in the hole where they previously hid themselves.

The foreign workers, who are Borains, arrive at the pit and are getting ready to go down the shaft. The miners are desperate and meet at the entrance of the Voreux, which is guarded by armed military men. Despite calls for restraint by the captain, the miners are angry and feel betrayed. They shout insults and chant, calling for the death of the



Borains. They want to be masters on their own land. Etienne Lantier knows that he cannot keep the crowd back anymore; that crowd does not even seem to notice that they are facing armed enemies. Lantier is resigned and fears the worst will happen. The crowd finds strength in its numbers and seems to fear nothing. They push forward, trying to force the soldiers back. It seems like everyone has joined the ranks of a crowd ready to face its final battle. The miners are stretched to the limit of what men can endure and have nothing left to lose, except their life.

The armed men fire on the crowd. A lot of miners fall, including Maheu. It is a disaster and as a result, 14 people are dead and 25 wounded.

Part VI: Chapter 1-5 Analysis

In Part VI, the triumphant collectivism displayed by the characters of *Germinal* quickly deteriorates; the last chapter of this section signals the failure of collectivism and the irreversible regression of the miners of the Voreux toward a form of individualism that is ultimately powerless.

The situation in the mining village is getting worse. The miners are literally starving and their condition is accentuated by the cold weather. The contrast between the heat inside the coal mine and the freezing weather outside is even more striking as the miners have nothing to feed on. The lack of coal as a source of collective energy (for the houses) is correlated with the lack of food, which is a source of personal energy (for the body).

Etienne Lantier is now rejected by everyone; his ideas and plans having failed, he is now considered a virtual outcast. Moreover, the army is now occupying Montsou, which means that the miners are powerless, a situation which fuels even more ambivalent anger. Lantier hides underground, a symbol of the return to earth and also his symbolic death as a member of the collectivity. In the novel, the same hole in the ground that he uses as a hiding place to keep himself alive will later be used as a grave for the murdered soldier.

By befriending a soldier, Lantier discovers that he is not that different from the people he is fighting against. Both men share hopes, dreams and memories; both wish for the same kind of life and in the end, they can only be differentiated by the master they serve. In the case of the soldier, the master is the social order; for Lantier, the master is the collectivity of workers that he feels he belongs to. This symbolic union between the revolutionary Lantier and the obedient soldier is typical of the highly defined contrasts used by the author of *Germinal* throughout the novel. The nightly setting, combined with the darkness of the coal-colored environment, is used to blur the differences.

The mining company decides to restart the Voreux using miners from another country. Chaval, an opportunist and self-serving character, announces that he will side with the Company; he will lead a team of scabs down the Voreux. This triggers a fight between him and Lantier. Once again, the idealist follows his principles and spares the traitor's life. Etienne Lantier knows that uncontrolled anger and the potential for murder runs in



his vein, something his ancestors left him as a heritage. However, he can still control it. But Lantier is more and more isolated and his ideals are, for all practical purposes, dead. He slowly reverts to individualism. Either way, he cannot conciliate his positions with the voice of reason represented by Catherine and is unable to convince her to form a couple.

Individuals are powerless; Etienne Lantier is unable to stop Jeanlin from killing a soldier he previously befriended, just as he will later prove unable to stop the massacre of the striking miners at the Voreux. Collectivities, be it an army or a group of workers united by the same goal, can be a powerful source of change, but they can also be an instrument of social inertia. When two groups are opposed, the one that is most organized and structured ultimately wins. In a last burst of hope mixed with anger, the miners confront the army of guards in front of the mining pit. They have nothing to lose, yet they are blind to the dangers that the situation represents. In the end, their disordered anger is tantamount to a collective suicide and many of them are killed. Among the dead, some of their most respected members (Maheu) and, sadly, even their children (Lydie and Bebert).



Part VII: Chapter 1-6

Part VII: Chapter 1-6 Summary

The company seems confused about the way things turned out and tries to convince the miners to go back to work. They promise that they will make improvements. In the house where la Maheude stands alone as the head of the family, no one wants to go back to work; they figured that it would be catastrophic to allow the company to kill the father and then continue to exploit his children.

Etienne Lantier has to face the strikers' anger; the miners are now accusing him of every bad thing that happened to them since the beginning of the strike. He is now the target of constant insults from the people he tried his best to help. Rasseneur, who is more moderate than Lantier, takes back the reign of leadership. The Gregoires are celebrating the engagement of Negrel and Cecile; Deneulin is bankrupt and resorts to selling Jean-Bart to the company.

Etienne Lantier meets with Souvarine; both men chat about the success of Pluchart and the International, as well as the developing theories of Marxist socialism and Darwin. Souvarine tells Lantier that his wife was executed by the government for political activities. They both discuss the future of the miners and the re-opening of the mines. Souvarine tells Etienne that he will probably leave soon, after which they split. Souvarine goes on to apply his anarchist theories to the conflict and starts to sabotage the Voreux pit by weakening the timber that keeps the surrounding underground water out of the mine.

Etienne is back with the Maheu family. Catherine has decided to go back to work because she cannot handle the poverty of her family anymore. Etienne follows her to work. They meet Souvarine at the entrance of the pit; the Russian anarchist shivers at the thought of endangering his friend, but says nothing about his actions.

A lot of miners are back to work and the strike is effectively over. The workers have all lost a lot, yet they gained nothing. Etienne, Catherine and Chaval are working side by side. Water is leaking dangerously but the supervisors pay no attention to it. Suddenly, the team faces an onrush of water and the tunnel is inundated. Most of the miners manage to get out but about twenty of them, including Chaval, Lantier and Catherine, are left behind.

Negrel declares that the pit is a complete loss and goes back into the mine in the hope of saving some lives. After looking at the sources of the leaks, he comes to the conclusion that the flood is the result of intentional sabotage. Every tunnel is now blocked and it is impossible to do anything; he rushes back to the surface. A huge crowd of powerless miners is now assembled around the pit, unable to do anything to help the survivors who are crying for help. Soaked with the flood water, the mine implodes and sinks into the ground.



In Paris, Hennebeau is made Officer of the Legion of Honor. Danseart is fired. The catastrophe of the Voreux and the fate of the miners left underground make a lot of noise in the region's newspapers. Many miners volunteer to help and work with the rescuers. However, things appear quite complicated because there is no sign of life coming from underground. Three days after the disaster, the rescue workers start to dig in the hope of reaching possible survivors. Zacharie works desperately to try and save his sister, but he dies in an accident after lighting up his lamp. During a familial visit to the Village Two Hundred and Forty, Cecile is strangled by Bonnemort.

In the heart of what is left of the Voreux, the abandoned miners are up to their stomach in water. They try to find an exit and split their party, but get lost in the maze of galleries and veins. Etienne, Catherine and Chaval end up in an elevated corner of the tunnel that they imagine would be enough to keep them alive. A conflict erupts again between the two men and Lantier kills Chaval, leaving his corpse floating in the surrounding water.

The two remaining miners, Lantier and Catherine, are in a precarious position: the water is rising and they are exhausted. They try to climb to a higher ground. Finally, they hear the sounds of digging miners trying to locate them. After nine days, the two weak and starving lovers finally make love. Catherine dies soon afterward from exhaustion and Etienne is left alone with two corpses, waiting for the rescuers to reach him. After a few more days, they reach him, the only survivor of the tragedy of the Voreux.

In April 1866, after six weeks of recovery in the hospital, Etienne Lantier leaves the mine behind him, along with all the bad memories. All his co-workers have started to work again; even La Maheude is now working for the company. All of them secretly hope that one day, they will get their revenge. Lantier says goodbye to all of them and leaves for Paris to work with Pluchart. He is filled with political ambitions that grew out of his experiences. He leaves knowing that one day the "germination will tear the earth apart."

Part VII: Chapter 1-6 Analysis

The last reasonable voice of the striking miners, Maheu, is now forever silent. Nothing is left to keep the strike going other than the resentment of the miners toward the Company. Yet that collective resentment is not strong enough to resist the natural human need for food and heat and the strike dies its natural death.

Souvarine is a character that represents the power of the individual. He never believed in the strike and the collectivism that moved it; as a result, he did not actively participate in the worker's movement. Even though he comes from Russia, he remains the most individualistic of all the miners. His sabotage of the foundations of the mine is a symbol of the power of the individual, which is ultimately destructive. Souvarine often claimed during the days leading to the conflict that an individual's actions can only be effective through destruction. However, his uncompromising plan to force the reconstruction of the mine and thus enable change, also fails against the forces of inertia.



The implosion of the Voreux signifies the death of the starving monster. In a single strike of irony, the water flowing in the veins of the earth drowned out the man-made hell. Though the monster will later be reborn, catastrophes pile up around its corpse as the daughter of Leon Gregoire is strangled by Bonnemort and Zacharie kills himself accidentally while trying to save his sister. The miners are powerless against the disastrous circumstances that overwhelm them.

Having returned to his individuality, Lantier cannot help but let his uncontrolled anger out and kills Chaval using a chunk of the mine. This ultimate release of destructive energy enables the main character to free his sexual impulses and he unites with Catherine in one last embrace. When the girl dies to leave Etienne alone and trapped, the compromising and reasonable voice of long standing traditions dies with her.

In the last part of the novel, the world of *Germinal* comes full circle; things look just as they did when the story began. The miners' working conditions are no better than they were prior to their collective action, but they are not worse either. They did lose lives and energy, but they have the lingering hope that they can one day turn things around in their favor in the battle against the Company. The middle class represented by the bourgeois also lost a few lives (Celine Gregoire, Maigrat) and a lot of money in the process; the novel shows that the forces of inertia work even against those who have everything to gain in fighting to maintain the status quo. In the end, the idealist Etienne Lantier traversed the world of the Voreux and though he accomplished little in terms of actual gains, he left the miners with a will to fight; the seed of this will may eventually grow and burst again through the infertile ground of the mining pit.



Characters

Chaval

Chaval is the name of the miner who took Catherine Maheu from her family house. He is twenty-five years old and thin but strong looking. He has some limited leadership abilities but is overly dominant and self-centered. He worked along with the Maheus down in the mine. He takes possession of Catherine Maheu by raping her and later takes her away from her family. However, he is a violent man who treats woman like a possession of limited value; Catherine will eventually leave him and come back to her family. During the strike, Chaval works for the Jean-Bart mine; he is bribed by its owner and convinces the other miners not to go on strike. Chaval is killed by Etienne Lantier during the flood of the mine; his floating corpse haunts the two survivors trapped in the mine.

Chaval represents the typical 'macho' man with no identifiable moral values. He is manipulative and will follow the others only if and when it profits him directly. He is partly driven by a visceral hate of Etienne Lantier and what he represents.

Souvarine

Souvarine is a Russian anarchist who works for the mining company as a repairman. Born and raised in Russia by an aristocratic family, he first learned medicine but he became convinced early on of the necessity of change and social action. Souvarine and his mistress Annouchka were part of a team that plotted the assassination of the Czar. Most of the conspirators got caught and hung, including Annouchka. Souvarine is a hard line anarchist who believes that violence is the only key to real social change. He remained indifferent to the strike; he did not mix with the workers when they were on strike and did not participate in their meeting. However, he was truly disgusted by the outcome of the strike and decided to put his own words in action by sabotaging the mine. At the risk of his own life, he proceeded to weaken the timber that kept the underground water from flooding the mine. He disappears on the day of the disaster after crossing path with Etienne and Catherine, who were on their way to work at the doomed Voreux.

Souvarine represents the political extremist. He is an anarchist who does not believe in organized resistance or passive action. He is convinced that only violence and terrorism is able to bring about changes and force people to find solutions to inequalities, oppression and the other social problems that plague human societies.

Catherine Maheu

Catherine Maheu is the second child of Toussaint Maheu. She is thin and tall, with piercing green eyes. She is a caring character with strong family values; she takes care



of her siblings. The fifteen-year-old Catherine works along with the other members of the Maheu family, as well as Lantier and Chaval, inside the coal mine of the Voreux. Catherine likes Etienne but falls under the repeated insistence of Chaval. One night, she is forced into having a sexual relationship with Chaval and loses her virginity. Catherine moves in with Chaval, but he turns out to be a violent man who beats her repeatedly and treats her like a slave. She eventually returns home to her parents. During the strike, she continues to work at the Jean-Bart mining pit with Chaval. She comes to the rescue of her family when she realizes that they have nothing left to eat.

Catherine Maheu's life is saved by Mouquette, who protects her from the flying bullets of the armed guards at the cost of her own life. However, she later gets trapped in the flooded coal mine. She finds Etienne Lantier in the inundated tunnels of the mine and they wait together for the rescuers to dig out an escape route for them. The pair encounters Chaval, Catherine's ex-boyfriend; Chaval tries to assert his dominant relationship with Catherine but is killed by Lantier. After over a week of waiting in the darkness of the mine without food, clean water or fresh air, Catherine and Etienne hold on each other and make love. Catherine is exhausted and starved; she dies in the arms of Lantier.

Catherine represents the virgin soil in which the seed is planted. She is the romantic interest of the main character, Etienne Lantier. However, her relationship with Lantier is interrupted by the presence of Chaval, who rapes her and takes control of her body, literally stealing her from Lantier. Catherine is also the price that Etienne Lantier pays for hesitating - first at kissing her, then at taking care of Chaval. In the first part of the novel, Lantier wonders if the reason he wants to go back and work with the miners is his attraction for Catherine or his compassion and human solidarity. This duality of motives persist throughout the book, leaving the reader to wonder if the whole strike was but a complicated plan designed to win over Catherine and tear her from the grip of Chaval. In the end, Catherine is just as doomed as the rest of the miners; she suffers until the very last minute and dies as a victim of her environmental and social conditions. The little pleasure and freedom she takes from her relationship with Lantier ends up killing her, just like the freedom sought by the striking miners leads to even worse living conditions.

Toussaint Maheu

Toussaint Maheu is the father of the Maheu children and the leader their working team down in the mines of the Voreux. He does not drink and is respected by everyone in the miners' village. The Maheu family lives in a cramped house in the Village Two Hundred and Forty. Toussaint Maheu is the son of Vincent Maheu, also known as Bonnemort. He is married with La Maheude, the mother of all his children. Toussaint is a hard worker with little imagination of his own; through long discussions during their time together; he gets indoctrinated by Etienne and agrees with political positions. His wife plays an important role in convincing him to support the strike and assert himself.



Maheu is put in charge of delivering the miners' request to the management of the mining company when the strike is launched. He takes an active role during the long strike. His wife pushed him to follow the group when they faced the armed guards at the entrance of the Voreux. When the guards started shooting, Toussaint Maheu was caught in the middle and fell; a bullet had run through his heart.

Toussaint Maheu represents the head of the family structure. He is the one who carries the seed of heredity and ensures that the social and familial structures are reproduced from his generation to the next. He is constantly torn between the need to maintain the traditions and the opening represented by the revolutionary ideas of Lantier. In the end, both failed him and his family.

Bonnemort (Vincent Maheu)

Bonnemort is the nickname of fifty-eight years old Vincent Maheu, the father of Toussaint Maheu. Vincent Maheu has been working for 50 years for the mining company, 45 of which were spent underground. The elder Maheu was the first person that Etienne met when he approached the Voreux pit for the first time.

Bonnemort means 'good death,' a play on words that foreshadows the role of the character in the events to come. The man keeps coughing and spitting coal, problem which he attributes to a cold but that soon turns out to be much worse as soon afterward he is unable to continue to work. During a protest demonstration by the strikers, Bonnemort and La Brulee grab the innocent Cecile Gregoire and stop short of breaking her neck; she manages to free herself from their grip and to escape. Following the confrontation between the strikers and the armed guards, which ended with the shooting death of several members of his family, the old Maheu suffers brain damage; the man loses his mind and stops talking altogether. Following this accident, he spends his days staring at the cold fireplace in the family house. During the strike, the Gregoire family decides to pay a visit to the Maheu as a token of their compassion toward the poor. Bonnemort recovers his mind for a few briefs moments, just long enough to grab Cecile Gregoire's neck and strangle her to death.

Bonnemort represents the fate of the miners as a whole and the fate of the Maheu family in particular. He is already dying when he appears in the first pages of the novel; a product of a factory that does nothing but eat the miners from the inside. He also represents the inner desire of every slave to put to death those that he perceives as the cause of his slavery. Bonnemort killed Cecile Gregoire, a representative of the 'bourgeoisie,' in a sudden and uncontrollable act of violence triggered by a flickering moment of lucidity.

Mouquette

Mouquette is a potter at the Voreux. She is eighteen years old and lives in the abandoned mine of Requillart with her father Mouque and her brother Mouquet. She has a good character but is promiscuous and overweight. While Mouquette was fond of



Etienne Lantier and somewhat of a competitor to Catherine Maheu, she did not hesitate to save sacrifice her life for the latter. She dies saving the life of Catherine Maheu during the armed assault on the strikers.

Mouque

Mouque is the father of Mouquette and Mouquet. He lives in the abandoned mine of Requillart along with his children and he takes care of the horses underground.

Maigrat

Maigrat is owner of the most important (and practically only) retail store in Montsou. He is greedy and abusive. He would usually refuse credit to the miners who came to him for help; the women specially hate him because he is also a pervert who regularly request sexual favors in exchange for credit. He asked for Catherine in exchange for some credit to La Maheude during the strike. During the strike, his shop was assaulted by the angry miners; he died trying to escape the mob. Immediately after he died, the vengeful women mutilated his corpse and paraded with his genitals. The word 'maigrat' is a collage of two French words related to food: 'maigre' (lean) and 'gras' (fat).

Hennebeau

Hennebeau is the general manager of the mining company. He has a history of marital problems and when the miners go on strike, he seems more preoccupied by his wife's ongoing affair with Negrel, an engineer at the Voreux, than by the problem at hand. However, once the stike is over, he is decorated with a medal (the Legion of Honour) by the government for his service.

La Brulee

La Brulee is the mother of La Pierronne, a neighbour of the Maheu family. The woman is constantly angry at the company for the death of her husband; the author describes her as a "terrible old woman." She leads the attacks of the strikers during the rampage in Montsou, helps mutilating the corpse of the grocer Maigrat and parades his bloody genitals at the end of a pike. She is also responsible for ordering the miners to push ahead against the armed troops in the Voreux. She is killed by the soldiers during the attack and dies "like a bundle of dry faggots."

Jules

Jules is the name of the young soldier killed by Jeanlin. His body was hidden in an abandoned part of the mine, under a pile of rocks, by its assassin with the help of Etienne Lantier.



Jeanlin Maheu

Jeanlin is the eleven-year-old child of Toussaint Maheu. He is a typical problem child who is intent on committing petty crimes. He leads and abuses his two companions, Bebert and Lydie. He often hides in an abandoned part of the mine, which he reaches through a forgotten opening in the ground. Jeanlin kills one of the young soldiers that were guarding the mine by jumping on him and driving a knife down his throat. He teams up with Etienne Lantier to hide the corpse of the soldier in his burrow.

La Maheude

La Maheude is the wife of Toussaint Maheu. She is the one carrying most of the burden of the hardship that the family has to go through. She takes an active role in the conflict by pushing her husband to use his influence in order to fight the company. She continues to support the strike even after her husband is killed by the armed guards. In the end, despite her resentment toward the company, she goes to work underground in order to feed what is left of her family.

Cecile Gregoire

Cecile Gregoire is the daughter of Leon Gregoire and the future wife of Negrel, an engineer at the Voreux mining pit. She was raised in the comfort and security of the bourgeoisie and is oblivious to the social problems that surround her. She is caught by the angry miners during a march on Montsou and barely escapes with her life from the grip of Bonnemort and La Brulee. She dies a few months later, strangled by Bonnemort during a compassionate visit to the home of the Maheus.

Cecile Gregoire represents the middle-class bourgeois who are condemned by their inaction and their inability to understand the conditions that keeps them where they are. Cecile dies because she could not understand that she was responsible for the conditions of living of the miners.

Lydie Pierron

Lydie is a fragile ten-year-old girl who works in the mine. She regularly teams up with Bebert under the leadership of Jeanlin to steal food. She is killed by the armed guard along with Bebert during the massacre.

Pluchart

Pluchart is the name of the director of the local branch of an association of workers called the International. He used to work at the same railway company as Etienne



Lantier; the two men are friends. Pluchart only appears in the novel during a meeting of the miners prior to the strike at the Jolly Fellow.

Leon Gregoire

Leon Gregoire is a major investor in the Montsou Mining Company. He is the father of Cecile Gregoire. He does not take an active part in management and is relatively compassionate.

Etienne Lantier

Etienne Lantier is a nice looking young man, tall and skinny, around 21 years of age. He is a trained machinist, but he is out of work and is forced to accept work as a miner in the coal mine pit called the Voreux. He works alongside several members of the Maheu family. The family is led by Toussaint Maheu, the father of several miners working underground. He befriends fifteen-year-old Catherine, one of the Maheu children, and expects a romantic relationship. However, Catherine is taken away by Chaval. While staying in a room at The Advantage tavern, he befriends both the manager of the Inn, Rasseneur, and Souvarine, a Russian anarchist who teaches him the principles of political action. He later moves in with the Maheu family. For a while, Catherine and Etienne work side by side at the mine and sleep in the same room.

Etienne Lantier gets trapped inside the coal mine during the flood. He finds Catherine Maheu in the flooded labyrinths of the mine and they wait together for the rescuers to dig out an escape route. The pair encounters Chaval, Catherine's ex-boyfriend; the latter tries to assert his relation with Catherine but Lantier crushes his head with a rock and kills him. After two weeks of waiting in the darkness of the mine, Catherine and Etienne hold on each other and make love. Catherine is exhausted and starved; she dies in the arms of Lantier. The rescuers finally get through and take exhausted Lantier out of his hole. After six weeks of recovery time in the hospital, Lantier leaves the Voreux and heads for Paris to work for the worker's movement.

On the political side, Etienne Lantier represents the prevalent trend in the workers' movement toward unions. He is young, idealist and articulate. He is convinced that he can change the world around him; however, he is not so convinced that he can change himself and win over his inner demons. These demons finally catch up to him as he ends up killing Chaval, his competitor for the love of Catherine. He somehow gets spared the social consequences of his crime as the body of Chaval remains underground. This situation mirrors the situation of Jeanlin, who killed a military guard and did not have to pay for his crime. Both crimes are attributed to 'natural' causes by the novel: the killer's inescapable instinct to kill without a goal or reason.

Lantier's political path mirrors his romantic and mostly platonic relationship with Catherine. He chooses his opinions carefully and does not make a move until all the barriers between him and his goal are down. Catherine rejects him at the same time as the other miners, exhausted by the length of the strike, start blaming him for their failure

to win over the company. The flooding of the mine abolishes the last barriers between Etienne and Catherine, just as it puts an end to the resentment of the miners.

Deneulin

Like his cousin Leon Gregoire, Deneulin inherited a part of his ancestor's investment in the Montsou mines. Instead of leaving his money in the company's hands to profit, he invested in a separate mining pit and used his inheritance money to revamp the mining installations of Jean-Bart. However, Deneulin lacks the skills necessary to manage his investment properly. His cousin refuses to lend him any money to keep his mine going. During the strike, Deneulin convinces Chaval to help him convince the miners and prevent the strike to spread to Jean-Bart; the striking miners of the Montsou Company consider this refusal to follow the strike by the workers in Jean-Bart as treason. Deneulin's refusal bring his miners to the surface is a death warrant for his mine, as the striking miners destroy his installation, an act which ultimately forces Deneulin to go bankrupt and sell his mine to the Montsou Company.

Demeulin represents the entrepreneurial, independent capitalist whose individuality defies the rules established by the typical bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century.



Objects/Places

Battle

Battle is the name of a horse. The animal worked ten years in the mine without seeing the light of day. The old white horse died during the flood accident.

Poland

Poland is the pet rabbit of Rasseneur. The anarchist Souvarine was very attached to the animal.

Montsou Mining Company

The Montsou Mining Company operates the coal mine of the Voreux. The company operates nineteen coal mining facilities (twenty after acquiring Jean-Bart) and is owned by Cornille and Jenard.

International Workers Association

The association is simply referred to as the "International" in *Germinal*. It designates an international organization that was the forerunner of the modern-day workers' unions.

The Advantage

The Advantage is the name of a tavern located between the Voreux pit and the Village Two Hundred and Forty. The tavern is operated by Rasseneur but owned by his wife.

Village Two Hundred and Forty

Name of the mining settlement located next to the Voreux coal mining pit; usually referred to as the "Village" in the novel. Almost every miner working for the company lives in the Village.

The Volcano

The Volcano is a cafe located in Montsou which offers musical entertainment.



Trumpet

Trumpet is the name of a horse that was taken down the coal mine of the Voreux. The animal was never able to adapt to living underground; despite Battle's signs of compassion and friendship, he died a few months later.

Montsou

Montsou is the name of the mining village near the Voreux mining pit.

Voreux

Voreux is the large coal mining pit where the characters of *Germinal* work. It is located two kilometers from Montsou and eight kilometers from Marchiennes.

Marchiennes

Marchiennes is a town in the mining district in the northern part of France. The closest city to Marchiennes is Lile.

Requillart

Requillart is an abandoned coal mine located near the Voreux. The ruins of Requillart are surrounded by wild hay where the youth of the village meet, hidden from view. The Mouque family lives in the Requillart mine.

Jolly Fellow

The Jolly Fellow is the bar ran by Widow Desire. During their meeting at the Jolly Fellow, the workers met with Pluchart and agreed to join the International.

Hopper

A hopper is a pyramid-shaped funnel that allows the coal to be loaded in the railway cars.

Coke-oven

Coke is the fuel produced by treating raw coal ore to high temperature. Coke-ovens are ovens ran by coke fuel.



Jean-Bart

Jean-Bart is the independent coal mine ran independently by Demeulin. This is where Chaval and Catherine worked during the miners' strike. The installations of Jean-Bart are destroyed by the striking miners of Montsou; the mine is later sold to the Montsou Mining Company by its bankrupted owner.

Le Voreux

Le Voreux is a mining pit near Montsou. It is where most of the characters of the novel work.



Themes

Social Movement

Germinal is a novel about the birth of political ideas and social movement in a society. Zola's masterpiece is set in the French society of the 1860's; the action happens during the early stages of the rise of the working class against the aristocratic middle class establishment (called the "bourgeoisie"). The title of the novel itself points to the idea of germination in plants. In Zola's analogy, social and political ideas behave much like wild seeds in the natural world: sowed in a fertile soil and given the right conditions and, ideas will grow and develop into something much bigger and stronger than their initial state might suggest. Ideas will also spread around them and contaminate their surrounding, and eventually take a life of their own. In Zola's novel, the seed of political revolution is planted, quite literally, in a hole in the ground: the Voreux mining pit. The initial seed is carried by the young Etienne Lantier; like his counterpart in nature, the man is young and full of energy and promises. In other words, he is ready to burst into something new, ready to reproduce and spread himself around. In this case however, the soil in which seed of a political revolution is planted is not a very fertile one and it will need a lot more than a bit of rain to make it grow.

Indeed, the whole germination of ideas and revolt fails, as in the end the strike leaves the miners in a situation that is just as bad, if not worse than it was before the start of the conflict. Etienne Lantier fails at the reconciliation between the radicalism represented by the anarchist Souvarine and the more moderate and somewhat conciliatory positions of Rasseneur. The political positions of Lantier mirror the infighting which was at the time dividing the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), torn between the anarchists and the Marxists of the era. At the end of the novel, Lantier leaves the settlement to go work with Pluchart for the IWA - and possibly to take part in the Commune.

In the world where *Germinal* takes place, coal is civilization's main source of energy. Therefore, the companies that control the extraction and distribution of coal are the most profitable. In order to maximize their profit, the mining companies minimize their spending on the only resource they can control: the miners. Coal miners are treated like sub-humans; indeed, the miners work, and for all practical purpose live underground. The coal mine is hell on earth, burning the life away from its slave from under the ground. This hell is set to burn for eternity, as all humans seem trapped in their inescapable fate and traditions and are thus bound to go to hell no matter what road or action they take in trying to avoid it.

The author of *Germinal* presents a wide range of political views, from the purely capitalistic view of the rich mine owners, to the radical positions of the anarchist Souvarine. In between, he also shows the opinions of Rasseneur, a compromising democrat whose moderate positions force him to take a back seat when the situation heats up. He also presents the logic of the bourgeois (Leon Gregoire and his wife), who



believe that the poor miners are condemned by their fate and cannot escape their conditions. The opinions and ideas of Lantier, which started out as weak and hesitant and developed into political actions, seemed for a moment to win the day. In the end however, the people fall victim to all of them and no one comes out a clear winner.

Working Conditions

Germinal describes the working conditions of the miners as very difficult and horrible, even by nineteenth century's standards. Accidents and professional diseases are common problems and the pay is ridiculously low. From the onset of the novel, Vincent Maheu (Bonnemort) summarizes the life of a miner for Etienne Lantier by telling his own story. He started working for the mine as a eight-year-old child; the fifty-eight-year-old man that is now is disabled and can only work as a carter; he is so sick that he is spitting coal off his lungs, as if he was filled with it. Money is so scarce that the man is willing to delay his retirement until he turns sixty, because by then his yearly retirement allowance will be 30 francs higher.

The author's description of the Voreux mining pit is that of a dark and hellish place, ready to devour the men, women and children it employs. Everything in the pit is dark and cold, the buildings on the surface are barely lit. On the surface, the structures are full of holes, providing an easy way in for the cold wind to chill the half-naked workers; these structures are in fact so badly maintained that they are threatening to crumble at any moment. The pay is directly related to the number of cars and the amount of coal manipulated by the workers; consequently, the older miners get paid less than the younger ones, the women less than the men. In order to work, the miners line up barefoot at four o'clock in the morning, ready to be packed in groups of five inside a car which is then lowered into the mine through the shaft. Working in the mine is by itself a very dangerous job.

Once inside the mine, the workers have to face an extremely harsh work environment where they are forced to perform physical tasks in very difficult working conditions. The tunnels where they work are always extremely humid and temperatures of 50 degrees (C) or more are not uncommon. Many workers, men and women alike, have to constantly bend in order to move around the cramped space of the tunnels. Their work consists in nothing but mining coal ore with a pick, filling cars and pushing their load up the rails. They are responsible for setting up the timber that keeps the tunnels opened. The air inside the mine is saturated with coal particles, which leads to diseases that are particular to the miners (such as the coal-tainted spits of Bonnemort). The workers are also living under the constant threat of an explosion, a gas inhalation, an uncontrolled flood or some other mining disaster just waiting to happen.

Outside the mine, the miners are treated like animals; they are parked in settlements filled with minimal houses, where they have almost no contact with anyone but miners like them. Their pay is too low for them to afford anything but the essentials of life; they have no hope of ever saving enough money to change their conditions of living. The company pays for the miners' lodging, the heating (coal) and some minimal medical



assistance. However, all these 'benefits' are very basic and provide a level of comfort that is barely higher than that of a cage to an animal in a zoo.

Fate and Heredity

The characters of *Germinal* are constantly struggling to break out of the circle that confines them to a pre-determined lifestyle pattern; this lifestyle imposes severe limits on their freedom and their ability to grow. In *Germinal*, everything that happens seems pre-determined, mainly because the fate of every human being involved in the story is set by a combination of environmental conditions and features passed on from one generation to the next. Humans are trapped by their own fate, seemingly without the possibility of escape.

Throughout the novel, the main character, Etienne Lantier, is haunted by what he considers his hereditary alcoholism. Though he does not drink, he can still feel the anger inside of him, driven by generations of alcoholism; this gives him a tendency to act on impulse, without reason or even a clear goal. He was fired from his previous job at the railway company for hitting his supervisor, in a fit of rage that he regrets but knows that he cannot control; indeed, he fears that it could happen again.

The same barriers limit the life of the other characters in the novel. The Maheus represent the family structure and its traditions, closed and inescapable. The only way for the Maheu children to escape their fate is to marry, and marriage is but a way to spread the same hereditary traits that are trapping the humans in the first place. Zacharie Maheu marries, only to be killed by his own mistake a few months later, while trying to save his sister from the mine that swallowed her whole. When Jeanlin Maheu sticks a knife in the throat of a young soldier, he does so without reason or aim, simply because he felt like doing it. It is as if crime was running in his blood and he could not control the outcome of his own life. Catherine escapes her family and goes to live with Chaval, only to return later because her relationship managed to make her even more miserable. The settlement of the Two Hundred and Forty is itself a trap set by the company to insure that the miners never go out of their misery, a minimal concession to comfort in exchange for their freedom.

Style

Point of View

Germinal reads like a journalistic report on the events leading to a mine catastrophe. It combines in-depth descriptions of the situation of the people that are affected by the disaster and a collection of historical and technical facts related to the mining trade. It shows the confrontation between the owners of the capital (the mine owners and their managers) and the workers. The novel examines the living conditions of the miners and the managers and investors, as well as the needs and the political opinions and situation of each party. It describes in great details the conditions under which the miners live and work. In reporting the events, *Germinal* imposes no conclusion on the reader as to who is ultimately right or wrong in the long miners' strike that preceded the mine collapse; it leaves the conclusion opened, as if drawn by the facts themselves.

Despite the subject of novel and what might look like an obviously biased point of view at first glance, *Germinal* is not a novel intended for pushing a single political opinion; rather, it aims at representing the many point of views that come into play when a social conflict erupts. The result is a series of portraits that makes the reader feel like he or she is hovering over the different scenes, observing everything from a distance and under a ray of natural light. In order to accomplish this, the author combines several writing techniques, including: a systematic usage of the third person, a elaborate descriptive vocabulary that accentuates the details and 'contours' of the scene, a restraint in the dialogues and finally, a subtle shifting along the timeline of events.

Time shifting is essential, because it allows the author to present the important events from varying angle and with different point of views. Assuming that none of the character is either 'right' or 'wrong' but only driven by fate and conditions which they cannot change, the author often takes a step back in the timeline of events and tells the same events again while following a different set of characters. For instance, such a time shift occurs in chapters two and three of part IV; both chapters are recounting the same major event (the assault of the Jean-Bart mining pit by the striking workers), yet they follow a different path.

Setting

Germinal takes place between February 1865 and November 1866 in the North of France, a region of Europe where a lot of mining activity was taking place back in the nineteenth century. The novel follows a young man who is trying to cope with his inner demons as well as the complicated world around him. Etienne Lantier is an idealist who believes he can and should change the world wherever he feels that a change is needed. In the beginning, he gets hired in a coal mine and slowly integrates with the life of the miners. Soon he finds himself the leader of a workers' movement to better their living conditions. He leads them to a strike and enjoins them to sign with an international



union of workers that will advise and protect them. However, as the strike stretches beyond its expected timeframe and stretches the living conditions of the miners to the limit of survival, his political views end up turning the miners against him. The failure of the strike to bring about any gain for the working class, combined with the disastrous assault against the armed guards, opens the way for a more radical (and ultimately violent) solution. The sabotage of the mine by Souvarine traps Lantier and his romantic interest, Catherine Maheu, in the underground tunnels. Lantier ultimately survives the ordeal, but by then Catherine had died of exhaustion and hunger.

The Voreux, a coal mining pit owned and operated by the Montsou Mining Company, is at the center of *Germinal*. It is described literally as Hell; the miners are slave of an organization that forces them to feed the fire that burns them. They perform very difficult physical tasks that slowly take away their health as well as their will. They are doomed to repeat the same patterns that keep them in trapped in sub-human living conditions.

The Two Hundred and Forty is the mining village inhabited by the miners. Whereas the housing and heating is provided by the mining company, they are well below the accepted standards of living. The miners live with their families inside cramped areas and minimal conditions. They barely survive and have nothing to look for but work and sleep. Their only distraction is their neighbors, sexual activity and alcohol (when they can afford it). The village acts like a zoo for the visitors and its inhabitants are treated like animals.

Language and Meaning

Emile Zola uses a description technique that is meant to correspond to the one used by impressionist painters of the late nineteenth century. Like the latter, the author represents the emotions and perceptions of the characters by creating an atmosphere that integrates lights and merging color tones. The author constantly refers to the senses of sight and smell to accentuate the situation at hand.

In the world of *Germinal*, everything is darkened by the coal that the minors extract from the mining pit. There is coal dust and clouds everywhere: on every object, on every house, under every nail, even inside every pair of lungs. In order to highlight the details and the important parts of the story, the author uses heavy-handed colors and lights to paint and emphasize the little details of every-day life; this is typical of a naturalist approach to literature, where the environment is but a reflection of what goes on. Colors and scents are also use to highlight human emotions and the dynamics of relationships. In a similar manner, scents are used to emphasize physical presence and the promiscuity that is prevalent in the world of the miners. 10,000 miners work in the mines of Montsou. Their houses are so close to each other that they can constantly hear, see and smell each other at any time of the day. The workers, blackened by the coal dust, are packed in the cages that send them down the mineshaft like sardines in a can; together, they merge in a single dark body that the company treats indifferently and that the mine swallows day after day in a slow sip.



Almost every sentence in *Germinal* paints a scene for the reader from a similar point of view: "In the sunlight, which seem to dim their fires, the batteries of coke-ovens and the tall chimneys of the blast-furnaces stood belching forth clouds of smoke, which fell through the air in an endless rain of soot."

The world of mining has its own vocabulary, which is often very technical. Indeed, many of the 'jobs' that the miners occupy are highly specialized and do not correspond to anything that is done in any other type of profession. The problem of vocabulary is compounded by the fact that many of the jobs described in *Germinal* have since disappeared, mostly due to the mechanization of the trade. The result is that in many instances, the words themselves have disappeared from the dictionary. Luckily, the author of the novel takes care of minimizing the use of the mining vocabulary; wherever a new word is used, the author explains with force details the purpose of the operation at hand.

Structure

Germinal is delivered in forty chapters grouped under seven divisions called 'parts.' Each part is composed of five to seven chapters of even length. Neither parts nor chapters have titles; however, the parts correspond to clear divisions in the storyline, while the different chapters are roughly equivalent of a changing point of view.

Each chapter is composed of a series of medium-length descriptive paragraphs, regularly interrupted by small chunks of dialogues. Here, Zola basically reproduces the impressionist painters' approach to reality. He paints a series of small portraits depicting different scenes of a single event. Once these portraits are grouped together in series, they form the parts that describe a particular sequence of event that is relevant to the storyline.

The novel is written from the third person point of view. It revolves mainly around the main character, Etienne Lantier. However, the focus often shifts from one character to another in order to allow the analysis of a different point of view. For instance, the first chapter looks at Etienne Lantier, the second at the Maheu family, the third at the working miners, etc. Using the third person allows the author to modify the focus without changing the overall writing style and without confusing the reader as to what 'he,' 'she,' or 'they' represents.

The storyline involves a great number of characters and interrelated events. Each character has his or her particular personal history and environment, all of which participate in the development of the overall storyline. Zola systematically gives each character a background that explains his or her behavior and decisions. Each character then forms a piece of the puzzle that fits into the overall picture depicted in *Germinal*. It gives consistence to the story, but it also serve to reinforce the view that nothing really changes and that History tends either to reproduce itself or end in the death of the people involved.

Quotes

"He simply wanted to go down the mine again, to suffer and to struggle; and he thought angrily of those 'people' Bonnemort had told him about, and of the squat and sated deity to whom ten thousand starving men and women daily offered up their flesh without ever knowing who or what this god might be." Part I, page 71.

"Jeanlin departed, hands in pockets, dragging his feet and, though he was only a skinny ten-year-old, rolling his puny shoulders like an old miner." Part II, page 135.

"That evening, in the Advantage, the decision was taken to strike. Rasseneur had ceased to oppose it, and Souvarine accepted it as a first step. Etienne summed the matter up; if it was a strike the Company wanted, then a strike they could have." Part III, page 186.

"Everyone had stat down again at the table, and there they remained without a word, not daring to move but straining to hear, unnerved by the loud voices of these men." Part IV, page 216.

"'And how is it to be done? How are you planning to go about it?'
'By fire, sword and poison. The criminal is the real hero, the avenger of the people, the revolutionary in action, and not just someone who trots out phrases he's learned from the books. What we need is a whole succession of horrific attacks that will terrify those in power and rouse the people from their slumber.'" Part IV, page 245.

"La Maheude struggled to her feet and began to walk round the room. How in God's name had it come to this? Not a crumb of bread in the dresser, nothing left to sell, and not the semblance of a notion how they could lay their hands on a loaf of bread! And a fire that was about to go out!" Part IV, page 261.

"'Comrades! Are we agreed? Tomorrow morning at Jean-Bart!'
'Yes! Yes! Jean-Bart! Death to the scabs!'
And a tempest of three thousand voices filled the sky and died away in the pure light of the moon." Part IV, page 294.

"Suddenly she found herself in the blinding sunlight surrounded by a noisy crowd of people who were all jeering at her." Part V, page 320.

"Blood dripped everywhere, and the miserable lump of flesh hung down like a piece of meat being displayed on a butcher's stall. Up at the window Mme Maigrat had still not moved; but caught in the last rays of the sun, the flaws in the glass distorted her pale features, and she seemed to be grinning." Part V, page 371.



"Violence has never succeeded. You can't remake the world in a single day. Those who promised you they could change things at a stroke were either fools or rogues." Part VI, page 453.

"Etienne leaned over him, wide-eyed, and stared. So it was done, he had killed. The memory of all his past struggles came confusedly to his mind, memories of his long, futile battle against the poison that lay dormant in every sinew of his body, the alcohol which had slowly accumulated over the generation in his family's blood. And yet if he was drunk now, it could only be on hunger: his parents' alcoholism had sufficed at once remove." Part VII, page 510.



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the role of traditions and heredity in the world of the coal miners described in *Germinal*. Do you think that the characters act on free will, or are they just condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past generations? Do heredity and family traditions play a role in determining the outcome of your own actions?

How 'modern' is *Germinal*? Do you think that working conditions have evolved to the point of making the novel irrelevant? Make a list of the working conditions that are still

The vocabulary of mining is quite specialized and at times, esoteric. Are there any other trades that have their own vocabulary? Make a list of specialized words used in a particular trade (other than mining).

Local unions, such as the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO, have replaced the larger, more cumbersome global workers association such as the 'International.' Did the advent of unionized work change the condition of the working class? Discuss the goals and accomplishments of work unions in the world today.

How would you react to hunger if you were a miner on strike? Should they have cancelled the strike early on, or just continue the strike until? Discuss the options of the miners in the context of *Germinal*.

Did Zola correctly represent the different points of view of the different actors in the conflict he describes in *Germinal*? Who was right and who was wrong, given the circumstances?

Among the different social conditions listed in *Germinal*, give a list of those which changed for the better (or worse, as the case may be).