



Exploring Representation of 19th-Century French Society in the Novel *La Bête Humaine*: A Sociological Literary Approach

¹*Emmanuela Cristomarry Novriska, ¹Sunahrowi

¹ French Literature, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Jl. Raya Banaran, Sekaran, Kec. Gn. Pati, Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author e-mail: christomarrynovriska@students.unnes.ac.id

Received: April 2026; Revised: May 2026; Accepted: May 2026; Published: June 2026

Abstract

Literary works serve not only as a means of aesthetic expression, but also represent the dynamics of social life. Émile Zola's novel *La Bête Humaine* represents the dynamics of 19th-century French society, characterized by industrialization, moral crisis, social inequality, and complex power relations. In this context, Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction is relevant for understanding how relationships between characters shape behavior within social structures, and enables an analysis of the interrelationship between patterns of interaction, social structure, and power dynamics in society. The aim of this study is to analyze various forms of social interaction in Émile Zola's novel *La Bête Humaine* and reveal how these interactions reflect the social conditions of 19th-century French society. The method used is descriptive qualitative with a sociological approach to literature based on Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction. The material object is the novel *La Bête Humaine*, while the formal objects include concepts of social interaction such as dyads, triads, strangers, conflict, and secrets. Data in the form of narrative quotations and dialogue were collected through literature studies and close reading techniques, then analyzed using manifest and latent content analysis techniques to interpret the social meanings contained. The findings indicate that social interaction within the novel not only shapes relationships between characters but also reflects the social structures that influence behavior and character. Dyads, triads, and the stranger reveal relationships between characters that develop into mechanisms trigger destructive actions, whilst conflict and secrets expose tensions within power relations, social inequality, and moral crises in 19th-century French society. This study contributes to the field of literary sociology by emphasizing that social interaction within a text is not merely interpersonal, but is linked to broader social structures.

Keywords: Georg simmel; Social interaction; *La Bête Humaine*; Morals; Socio-politics; Literacy approach

How to Cite: Novriska, E.C., & Sunahrowi, S. (2026). Exploring Representation of 19th-Century French Society in the Novel *La Bête Humaine*: A Sociological Literary Approach. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 6(2), 635-648. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i2.4839>



<https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i2.4839>

Copyright© 2026, Novriska et al.

This is an open-access article under the [CC-BY-SA License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).



INTRODUCTION

Literature serves not only as a medium for aesthetic expression, but also as a means of representing the dynamics of social life. Through literary works, particularly novels, authors convey ideas, inner experiences, and reflections on social realities that transcend their own era (Tarigan et al., 2024; Wellek & Warren, 1948). The purpose of literature is to convey the author's inner experiences to the reader (Khakim et al., 2022). Among various literary genres, the novel is considered the most dominant in presenting social elements because it offers complex narratives through a range of social issues, thereby enabling a more comprehensive representation of social phenomena (Mahendra et al., 2022). Moreover, the novel is often described as a medium that depicts characters' actions based on their individual traits and personalities, woven into a coherent narrative

aligned with the author's intent (Wilujeng et al., 2025). Thus, the novel can be understood as an effective medium for examining the relationships between individuals, society, and the social structures that surround them.

In social life, individuals cannot be separated from their relationships with other individuals, groups, or institutions. Social interaction forms the basis of social relationships that not only strengthen integration but also give rise to dynamics such as cooperation, conflict, and relational tension (Ginting et al., 2024). Social interaction can also create social bonds that serve as a source of support and strengthen social cohesion within society (Sunahrowi, 2025). In the context of literature, particularly the novel, these dynamics are represented through relationships between characters, dialogue, and conflicts that reflect broader social processes (Permatasari et al., 2025). From a sociological perspective on literature, literary works, particularly novels, are not merely viewed as products of the imagination but also as reflections of social dynamics influenced by historical, economic, and ideological conditions (Mahardika et al., 2025). Therefore, the sociological approach to literature, utilising Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction, enables a more in-depth analysis of the interconnection between individual behavior within the text and the underlying social structure (Choirina et al., 2024).

One literary work that powerfully captures these social dynamics is Émile Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (Zola, 1890), the seventeenth novel in the *Les Rougon-Macquart* series. Set against the backdrop of 19th-century French society during the era of industrialization, the novel uses the world of the railways as a social space that not only reflects technological progress but also reveals shifts in social structure, urbanization, and the divide between the working class and the bourgeoisie. This industrial development not only transformed the economic order but also shaped patterns of social relations and the psychological pressures faced by individuals within modern society. In this context, Zola depicts the tension between rationality and human instinct, and demonstrates how social environmental factors play a role in shaping individual behavior, including morally deviant actions.

To understand the complexity of social relations in the novel, this study employs Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction. Simmel views society as a dynamic process formed through patterns of interaction between individuals, rather than as a static entity (Nurkolis & Parmin, 2021; Nurullah & Parmin, 2022). Various forms of interaction, such as dyads, triads, the 'stranger' position, conflict, and secrecy, constitute the fundamental structures that shape social relationships and influence individual behavior (Fraditha et al., 2023; Simmel et al., 2009). From this perspective, individual behavior cannot be understood in isolation from its relational context, but rather as the result of a complex network of social interactions. The application of Simmel's theory in the analysis of literary works allows for the revelation of how the structure of social relations within a text plays a role in shaping actions, morality, and the position of individuals within society (Widiyanti et al., 2023). Consequently, the application of Simmel's theoretical framework in the study of the novel *La Bête Humaine* provides distinctive analytical insights, as the novel can be understood as a complex network of social interactions influenced by the social environment, power relations, and psychological tensions.

This study fills a gap in previous research by analyzing *La Bête Humaine* from the perspective of Georg Simmel's social interaction theory. A number of previous studies have examined *La Bête Humaine* and other literary works through a literary sociology approach, yet most have focused on conflict in general or the classification of forms of social interaction. For example, Susanto's (2020) study, focuses on the dynamics of inter-character conflict using social conflict theory, but does not examine how the structure of

social relations shapes the characters' behavior. Meanwhile, Nurkolis & Parmin (2021) in their research, highlight the concept of microsociology in another work by emphasizing conflict and social structure, as well as the role of the social environment and interpersonal relationships in general, without elaborating on the specific functions of forms of interaction such as dyads, triads, or the position of the outsider. Furthermore, Wulandari et al. (2022), in their research, examine the forms of social interaction in the novel; however, their analysis remains limited to the classification of interactions without delving deeply into their connection to the formation of the characters' behavior and morality. Consequently, these studies have not specifically examined how social relational structures—such as dyads, triads, the position of the outsider, conflict, and secrecy—function as mechanisms that shape characters' behavior whilst simultaneously reflecting the socio-political and moral conditions of society.

Consequently, there is a research gap in the field of literary sociology, particularly regarding the underutilization of Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction to analyze the interrelationship between social relational structures, the formation of characters' behavior, and the representation of socio-political conditions in French naturalist literature. Consequently, this study offers a new perspective by employing Simmel's concepts of social interaction as the primary framework to examine how the relationships between characters in *La Bête Humaine* are not merely interpersonal but also function as a structure that shapes destructive actions, moral tensions, and power relations within society.

Against this background, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) how is the 'immoral' behavior of the characters in the novel *La Bête Humaine* influenced by their environment? and (2) how do the social interactions between the characters in *La Bête Humaine* reflect the socio-political and moral conditions of 19th-century France? In line with this, this study aims to analyze how the social environment and forms of interaction influence the behavior of the characters in *La Bête Humaine*, particularly the "immoral" actions depicted in the novel, and to demonstrate how social interactions between characters in the novel *La Bête Humaine* reflect the socio-political and moral conditions of 19th-century France. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to the development of literary sociology, particularly in the application of Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction to the analysis of naturalist literary works.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research is a qualitative descriptive literary study that aims to examine the representation of social interaction in Émile Zola's novel *La Bête Humaine* using Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction as the primary analytical framework. This type of research was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the meaning, context, and social processes represented through language and events in the novel (Cresswell & Poth, 2017); furthermore, the theory employed was selected because it enables a thorough examination of the relationships between characters, patterns of interaction, and the social dynamics that shape behavior and conflict within the literary text. From this perspective, individuals are understood as social beings whose actions cannot be separated from reciprocal relationships with other individuals or their social environment, where social position and patterns of interaction play a crucial role in the formation of character and behavior (Nurkolis & Parmin, 2021).

Object and Data Collection

The objects of this study consist of material and formal objects. The material object of the study is Émile Zola's novel *La Bête Humaine* (Zola, 1890), which serves as

the primary data source. The formal object of the study comprises the forms of social interaction within the text, analyzed based on Georg Simmel's concepts: dyads, triads, the 'stranger' position, conflict, and secrecy. The research data consists of narrative quotations and dialogue from the novel that represent interactions between characters. The data was taken from the original French text and accompanied by an English translation for the purposes of analysis. The selection of quotations is based on the following criteria: (1) they contain interactions between characters, (2) they reflect one of Simmel's concepts of social interaction, and (3) they examine their relevance to the formation of behavior, power relations, or moral conditions within the story. In this research, data collection and analysis were conducted using: (1) data cards, used to record text quotations along with page information, context, and initial categories; (2) a close-reading guide, which served to direct in-depth reading of the text with a focus on patterns of social interaction; (3) coding sheets, used to classify data into Simmel's conceptual categories such as dyads, triads, strangers, conflict, and secrecy; and (4) categorization tables, used to organize data based on the type of interaction, form of relationship, and their implications for character behavior. These instruments enable the analysis process to be conducted in a structured and traceable manner. Data collection was carried out using a literature review combined with close reading techniques (Damrosch, 2009). The data collection process was carried out in stages, namely: (1) reading the entire text of the novel *La Bête Humaine* to gain a general understanding; (2) conducting an in-depth re-reading with a focus on sections containing interactions between characters; (3) identifying and selecting relevant quotations based on predetermined criteria; (4) translating French quotations into English contextually; (5) recording data onto data cards accompanied by page numbers and contextual information; and (6) assigning initial codes based on Simmel's categories of social interaction (dyad, triad, stranger, conflict, and secrecy). In addition, secondary data sources in the form of books and academic articles were used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and interpretation.

Data Analyses

The data analysis technique in this study utilized content analysis, which encompasses both manifest and latent content analysis. Content analysis was chosen because this study focuses on the interpretation of meaning and social messages contained within literary texts (Julianto et al., 2021). Manifest content analysis was used to identify social interactions explicitly depicted in the text (Berdida et al., 2023; Neuendorf, 2017), whilst latent content analysis is applied to interpret the implied meanings behind these interactions, including values, ideologies, power relations, and the influence of the social environment on character development (Krippendorff, 2004; Stephane, 2023). The analysis process is carried out in several stages, namely: (1) data reduction, by selecting quotations relevant to the research focus; (2) data categorization, by grouping data into categories of social interaction based on Simmel's concepts; (3) manifest content analysis, which involves identifying forms of interaction explicitly displayed in the text; (4) latent content analysis, which involves interpreting the implicit meanings behind these interactions, including values, ideologies, power relations, and the influence of the social environment on the characters' behavior; (5) theoretical interpretation, using Georg Simmel's concept of social interaction as an analytical tool to explain the relationship between the structure of interaction and the formation of behavior; and (6) drawing conclusions, which summarizes the research findings as a whole. Thus, social interaction theory functions not only as a conceptual framework but also as an analytical tool directly employed in the process of data interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The Influence of Social Environment on Character Formation

Dyad and Triad Structures in Character Formation

In response to the first research question, regarding how forms of social interaction shape the behavior of characters in the novel *La Bête Humaine*—this study found that dyadic and triadic structures play a significant role as mechanisms that trigger destructive behavior. Based on the analysis, dyadic relationships tend to generate high emotional intensity, whilst the presence of a third party transforms the interaction structure into a triadic one rife with conflict. This is evident in the relationship between Séverine and Madame Lebleu, which was initially stable, as seen in the quote “*Séverine s’était effacée devant sa voisine*” (LBH/152) (“*Séverine had deferred to her neighbor*”), which indicates Séverine’s subordinate position; however, this structure turned into conflict following Philomène’s arrival as a third party through the spreading of gossip, as stated in “*depuis le jour où Philomène avait fâché les deux femmes*” (LBH/152) (“*from the day Philomène angered the two women*”). This shift illustrates the concept of ‘*divide et impera*’ in Georg Simmel’s theory, wherein a third party within a social environment acts as a catalyst for division, leading individuals towards negative behaviors such as prejudice and hostility.

Furthermore, the relationship between Roubaud and Séverine illustrates how a dyadic structure without a mediator can develop into a dominant relationship that culminates in physical and verbal violence. This is evident in the repeated dialogue “*Tu as couché avec !... couché avec !...*” (LBH/40) (“*You slept with him!... slept with him!...*”), which is accompanied by acts of physical violence. The emotional intensity within this closed relationship intensifies jealousy and possessiveness, so that Roubaud’s destructive behavior emerges as a consequence of an unbalanced pattern of interaction. Thus, the social environment in the form of dyadic interaction can become a space that fosters deviant behavior when there are no control mechanisms or counterbalances.

This study also found that triadic interactions not only trigger interpersonal conflict, but also shape dependencies within power relations in an institutional context. This is evident in the relationship between Roubaud, Séverine and Grandmorin. In the quote: “*si tu n’avais pas été ma femme, et si Grandmorin n’avait pas plaidé ma cause, j’étais fichu*” (LBH/21) (“*If you hadn’t been my wife, and if Grandmorin hadn’t pleaded my case, I would have been finished*”), it is clear that Roubaud’s position in his work is not determined solely by personal competence, but by social relations mediated by a third party. Within this structure, Grandmorin acts as a figure of authority with the power to influence institutional decisions. From Simmel’s perspective, the presence of a third party within the triad alters the distribution of power and creates relational dependency. This situation places Roubaud in a position that is not entirely autonomous, as his success depends on social networks rather than a neutral professional system. Consequently, feelings of frustration, cynicism, and distrust towards the principles of justice and meritocracy emerge. Thus, the triadic structure in the novel functions not only as a pattern of social interaction, but also as a mechanism representing power relations and inequality within the broader social structure. Thus, these findings suggest that the social environment—whether in the form of dyadic or triadic interactions—is not merely a context, but functions as an active factor shaping the characters’ behavior, including destructive, aggressive and deviant tendencies in the novel.

The Role of the Stranger in Individual Character Formation

Continuing the discussion of the research question regarding how social position influences character behavior, this study found that the position of an ‘outsider’ acts as a form of alienation that influences an individual’s actions and social orientation.

Based on the analysis, the character of Jacques exhibits the characteristics of a ‘stranger’ through a tendency to withdraw from his social environment, as seen in his attitude of avoiding interaction with colleagues, evident in the quote “*évitant les camarades*” (LBH/726) (“*avoiding comrades*”), which indicates a social distance deliberately maintained by Jacques. This condition is reinforced by the description “*retombé dans sa sauvagerie anxieuse d’autrefois*” (LBH/726) (“*returned to his former anxious savagery*”), which indicates a deepening of psychological alienation. Furthermore, this position is also evident in situations where the character of Jacques appears devoid of emotional involvement when he comes to give his testimony in a trial, as in the quote “*il n’avait ni remords ni scrupules*” (LBH/714–715) (“*He had neither remorse nor scruples*”), which indicates a lack of moral control within him. He testifies as though his involvement were merely a coincidence and his memory of the crime of killing Séverine is lost, as though it were not he who had committed it. This condition reflects Simmel’s concept of the individual who exists within a social structure yet maintains an emotional distance.

Furthermore, this position enables individuals to break free from the constraints of social norms, thereby creating space for antisocial tendencies to flourish. In this context, Jacques’s alienation not only leads to isolation but also facilitates the emergence of deviant behavior, such as moral insensitivity, a loss of empathy, and a tendency to engage in destructive acts. The absence of guilt and emotional engagement suggests that alienation is not merely social, but also psychological. Thus, the position of the ‘outsider’ serves as a condition that weakens normative control and allows the individual to develop behavior that deviates from social values, making alienation a key factor in the formation of ‘immoral’ behavior in the novel.

Reflections of 19th-Century French Socio-Political and Moral Conditions in *La Bête Humaine*

Conflict as a Mechanism of Power Relations

In response to the second research question—regarding how social interaction reflects socio-political conditions—this study found that conflict in the novel functions as a mechanism of power relations.

According to the analysis, conflict arises not only as clashes between individuals, but also as a manifestation of tensions within social and political structures. Statements such as “*Vous ne serez pas toujours les maîtres !*” (LBH/20) (“*You’re not always a boss!*”) indicate a threat to the stability of the hierarchy, particularly when Roubaud began to be suspected of being a Republican sympathizer, a position contrary to the interests of the ruling regime. This reflects the dynamics of power in 19th-century French society, against a backdrop of rising political tensions in the run-up to a change of regime and the struggle between conservative and republican factions.

Furthermore, conflict also arises in the form of tension between personal interests and institutional demands, as seen in the character of Monsieur Denizet, who must submit to authority for the sake of his career. The quote “*prêt à plier sous les ordres du pouvoir*” (LBH/269–270) (“*ready to submit to the orders of those in power*”), illustrates Monsieur Denizet’s obedience to authority. Indeed, under certain circumstances, the principle of justice is sacrificed, as seen in “*le sacrifice de l’idée de justice*” (LBH/267) (“*the sacrifice of the idea of justice*”); Monsieur Denizet transforms into an opportunistic figure who is willing to humble himself and obey the rulers’ orders for the sake of his own interests. This demonstrates that conflict is not always overt, but can manifest as

structural pressure within power relations. This situation reflects the reality of 19th-century French bureaucracy and the legal system, which were often influenced by political interests, where loyalty to the state and the hierarchy of power were frequently prioritized over moral principles or justice. From Simmel's perspective, this situation remains a form of conflict due to the tension between individual moral values and social structural pressures. Thus, conflict serves as a means of maintaining and negotiating one's position within power relations, whilst simultaneously representing the socio-political tensions of that era.

Secrets and the Formation of Individual Morality

Still addressing the second research question—namely, how social interaction shapes morality—this study found that secrecy acts as a primary source of moral tension.

According to the analysis, secrets function as mechanisms that regulate the distribution of knowledge and determine individuals' positions within social relationships. As long as a secret remains intact, it provides protection and stability; however, when a secret is revealed or threatened with exposure, a significant shift in power and psychological pressure occurs. This is clearly evident in the quote *“elle s’était livrée”* (LBH/257) (*“She had given herself up”*), which marks the moment when Séverine's secret begins to be revealed, followed by her emotional reaction as seen in *“elle en éprouva une défaillance”* (LBH/257) (*“She experienced a fainting spell”*). This finding suggests that Séverine's character, who experiences emotional turmoil as her secret begins to be revealed, demonstrates that morality is determined not only by actions but also by control over information.

Furthermore, the fear of being discovered by Roubaud regarding Séverine's secret affair with Jacques demonstrates that social perceptions play a significant role in shaping individual behavior, as seen in the dialogue *“Je t’assure qu’il sait tout”* (LBH/439) (*“I assure you he knows everything”*). The imagination of someone picturing them having sex reveals a shift from private pleasure to a sense of intimidation and threat. The inner turmoil that emerges in Séverine is a mixture of fear of the secret being exposed, guilt, and anxiety about the potential social consequences. This situation demonstrates that morality is determined not only by actual actions but also by the potential for information to be revealed within social relationships. This finding reflects the moral conditions of 19th-century French society, which placed great emphasis on reputation, honor, and social control, particularly within the context of domestic and gender relations. In a society governed by strict moral norms, particularly regarding women, the disclosure of secrets—especially those related to personal relationships—can threaten one's social standing and identity. Consequently, secrecy becomes a defining factor in the moral dynamics and social relationships within this novel.

Table 1. Synopsis of Main Findings in *La Bête Humaine*

Simmel's Concept	Data	Characters	Interaction Pattern	Social Meaning
Dyad	<i>“Tu as couché avec !... couché avec !...”</i> (LBH/40) (You slept with him!... slept with him!...)	Roubaud and Séverine	Closed dyadic relationship	Intense emotional relations without mediation lead to jealousy, domination, and physical violence
Triad	<i>- “depuis le jour où Philomène avait fâché les deux femmes”</i>	Séverine Madame Lebleu Philomène	Triadic interaction	The presence of a third party transforms stable relations into

Simmel's Concept	Data	Characters	Interaction Pattern	Social Meaning
	(LBH/152) (from the day Philomène angered the two women)			conflict through gossip and suspicion (<i>divide et impera</i>).
	- “ <i>si Grandmorin n’avait pas plaidé ma cause, j’étais fichu</i> ” (LBH/21) (If you hadn’t been my wife, and if Grandmorin hadn’t pleaded my case, I would have been finished)	Roubaud Séverine Grandmorin	Institutional triad	Social networks and authority shape dependency, frustration, and distrust toward meritocracy.
Strangers	- “ <i>évitant les camarades</i> ” (LBH/726) (avoiding comrades) - “ <i>il n’avait ni remords ni scrupules</i> ” (LBH/714–715) (He had neither remorse nor scruples)	Jacques	Social alienation	Emotional distance weakens moral control and encourages antisocial and destructive tendencies.
Conflict	- “ <i>Vous ne serez pas toujours les maîtres !</i> ” (LBH/20) (You're not always a boss) - “ <i>prêt à plier sous les ordres du pouvoir</i> ” (LBH/269–270) (ready to submit to the orders of those in power)	Roubaud and company management Monsieur Denizet	Power conflict Structural conflict	Conflict reflects tensions within social hierarchy and political instability in nineteenth-century France. Institutional pressure forces individuals to sacrifice justice for political loyalty and career advancement.
Secrecy	- “ <i>elle s’était livrée</i> ” (LBH/257) (She had given herself up)	Séverine	Hidden interpersonal relation .	Secrets regulate power, emotional stability, and moral identity within social relationships.

Simmel's Concept	Data	Characters	Interaction Pattern	Social Meaning
	- "Je t'assure qu'il sait tout" (LBH/439) (I assure you he knows everything)	Séverine Jacques Roubaud	Fear of exposure	Reputation, honor, and social judgement create psychological tension and moral anxiety.

The findings of this study indicate that *La Bête Humaine* portrays social interaction as a relational process that shapes the characters' behavior and reflects social and moral tensions. The transformation from a dyad to a triad, the position of the stranger as a form of alienation, conflict as a mechanism of power relations, and secrecy as a source of moral tension are key findings that answer the research questions. These findings reveal patterns of representation in the literary text without claiming to provide a comprehensive picture of 19th-century French society.

Discussion

This study examines how forms of social interaction in *La Bête Humaine* shape character behavior and represent socio-political as well as moral tensions through the perspective of Simmel's social interaction theory. The findings reveal four major patterns: the transformation from dyadic tension into triadic conflict, the position of the stranger as a form of alienation, conflict as a mechanism of power relations, and secrecy as a source of moral tension and social control. These findings confirm that social interaction in the novel functions not merely as narrative background, but as an active relational process that shapes destructive behavior, emotional instability, and moral anxiety among the characters. Through selected textual evidence, the study also demonstrates how the novel represents broader social and institutional tensions associated with nineteenth-century French society without claiming to fully represent the historical reality of that period.

The first major finding concerns the role of dyadic and triadic structures in shaping destructive behavior. The analysis demonstrates that dyadic relationships in the novel tend to produce intense emotional attachment because interaction occurs in a closed relational structure without mediation. This is evident in the relationship between Roubaud and Séverine, where jealousy and possessiveness escalate into verbal and physical violence. In Simmel's theory, dyads are characterized by emotional immediacy because each participant is directly dependent on the other. The absence of a balancing third party intensifies emotional pressure and makes the relationship unstable. The repeated accusation "*Tu as couché avec !...*" reflects how suspicion within a closed relational structure transforms intimacy into domination and aggression. These findings support Simmel's argument that small-scale interaction structures possess the capacity to shape individual behavior through emotional intensity and mutual dependency.

The study further reveals that the introduction of a third party transforms social relations into triadic structures that generate conflict and relational instability. The relationship between Séverine, Madame Lebleu, and Philomène illustrates how gossip functions as a social mechanism of division. Philomène's intervention destabilizes an initially harmonious relationship and produces hostility between the two women. This finding reflects Simmel's concept of *divide et impera*, in which the third party gains influence by creating division between others. Unlike the dyad, the triad introduces strategic relations, mediation, and competition, making social interaction more structurally complex. The findings therefore extend previous literary sociological studies on Zola by demonstrating not only the existence of conflict in the novel, but also the

relational mechanisms through which conflict develops. Earlier studies on *La Bête Humaine* frequently focused on violence, naturalist determinism, or social conflict in general; however, this study specifically highlights how interactional structures themselves contribute to destructive behavior.

In addition, the institutional triad involving Roubaud, Séverine, and Grandmorin demonstrates that triadic interaction also functions as a mechanism of power dependency. Roubaud's professional survival depends not solely on competence but on personal relations mediated by Grandmorin's authority. This finding confirms Simmel's idea that the presence of a third actor changes the distribution of power within social relations. The triadic structure produces dependency, frustration, and distrust toward meritocratic systems because institutional success becomes tied to relational influence rather than individual capability. From the perspective of literary sociology, this finding is important because it demonstrates how the novel represents institutional inequality through interpersonal interaction rather than through direct political exposition. The social environment in the novel therefore acts as a force that shapes the characters' moral orientation and psychological condition.

Another important finding concerns the role of the "stranger" as a form of alienation. Jacques embodies Simmel's concept of the stranger through his simultaneous presence within and distance from society. Although he remains physically integrated into the railway environment, he emotionally withdraws from social relationships and exhibits increasing psychological isolation. His avoidance of colleagues and lack of remorse after acts of violence indicate the weakening of emotional attachment and moral accountability. In Simmel's framework, the stranger occupies a paradoxical position: simultaneously near and distant, involved yet detached. The findings suggest that alienation in the novel functions not merely as social isolation but as a condition that weakens normative control and facilitates destructive behavior. Jacques's emotional detachment allows him to commit violent acts without fully experiencing guilt or empathy.

This finding also contributes to discussions in naturalist literary studies. Previous studies on Zola often interpret characters' destructive tendencies through heredity, instinct, or biological determinism associated with literary naturalism. However, this study suggests that social interaction and relational positioning also play a significant role in shaping deviant behavior. Jacques's violence is not represented solely as an inherited instinct, but also as a consequence of prolonged alienation and emotional disconnection from society. Thus, the study expands the interpretation of naturalist literature by integrating sociological interaction into the analysis of character formation.

The third major finding demonstrates that conflict in the novel operates as a mechanism of power relations. Conflict is represented not only through direct confrontation between individuals but also through structural tensions within political and institutional systems. Statements such as "*Vous ne serez pas toujours les maîtres !*" symbolize resistance toward hierarchical domination and reflect anxieties surrounding political instability during the late nineteenth century. Through these interactions, the novel represents tensions between authority, social class, and ideological opposition. However, the study does not claim that the novel directly reproduces the full reality of French society; rather, it demonstrates how selected narrative representations reflect broader socio-political concerns of the period.

The analysis of Monsieur Denizet further strengthens this interpretation. Denizet's willingness to sacrifice justice in exchange for career advancement illustrates how institutional structures pressure individuals into moral compromise. In Simmel's theory, subordination itself contains latent conflict because individuals must continuously negotiate between personal values and structural demands. Denizet's

obedience to political authority therefore represents a form of structural conflict in which domination is maintained through bureaucracy and institutional hierarchy rather than through overt violence. These findings align with previous sociological readings of Zola that emphasize the relationship between institutions and social inequality, yet this study specifically contributes by analyzing how those tensions are embedded within patterns of social interaction.

The final major finding concerns secrecy as a source of moral tension and social control. The analysis demonstrates that secrecy functions as a relational mechanism that regulates knowledge, power, and reputation. Séverine's fear when her secret begins to be exposed reveals how morality in the novel is shaped not only by actions themselves but also by the possibility of social discovery. Simmel argues that secrecy is one of the most important sociological forms because it structures trust, intimacy, and control within social relationships. In the novel, secrecy creates psychological instability because characters constantly negotiate between concealment and exposure.

The fear of social judgement associated with Séverine's relationship with Jacques further demonstrates how morality is socially constructed through reputation and surveillance. The anxiety surrounding exposure reflects the importance of honor and public perception within the novel's social environment. These findings support literary sociological arguments that moral norms in realist and naturalist fiction are often maintained through mechanisms of observation and social pressure. At the same time, the study extends previous research by showing that secrecy functions not only as a narrative device but also as a sociological force shaping emotional behavior and moral consciousness.

The findings confirm that *La Bête Humaine* represents social interaction as a dynamic process that shapes individual behavior and reflects broader social tensions. The transformation from dyadic tension into triadic conflict, the stranger position as alienation, conflict as a mechanism of power relations, and secrecy as a force shaping morality collectively demonstrate the relevance of Simmel's theory for literary analysis. These findings contribute to literary sociology by showing how interactional structures can be used to interpret character behavior, institutional domination, and moral instability within literary texts.

This study also opens possibilities for future research. Further studies may compare interactional patterns across other novels in the *Les Rougon-Macquart* series in order to examine whether similar mechanisms of alienation, conflict, and secrecy recur throughout Zola's naturalist project. Comparative studies involving other naturalist authors may also provide deeper insight into how social interaction is represented in nineteenth-century European literature. In addition, future research could integrate Simmel's interaction theory with other sociological approaches, such as power relations, class theory, or psychological sociology, to produce more comprehensive interpretations of literary social dynamics.

This study demonstrates that Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction provides an effective framework for analyzing naturalist literature beyond traditional deterministic interpretations. By focusing on relational structures such as dyads, triads, strangers, conflict, and secrecy, this study offers a sociological perspective that explains how interactional dynamics shape morality, violence, and institutional power in *La Bête Humaine*. Consequently, the study contributes to literary sociology by expanding the understanding of how social interaction operates not merely as narrative background, but as a structural force influencing character behavior and social meaning in nineteenth-century French fiction.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social interaction in Émile Zola's *La Bête Humaine* is represented through a complex network of relationships, which plays a significant role in shaping the characters' behavior and reflects the social, political and moral conditions of 19th-century French society. Based on an analysis using Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction, it was found that forms of interaction such as dyads, triads, the stranger position, conflict, and secrecy function as mechanisms that directly influence the actions and dynamics of relationships between characters. In particular, closed dyadic relationships tend to generate high emotional tension, which in some cases escalates into conflict when they evolve into a triadic structure. The presence of a third party in a triad introduces a distribution of power that influences the characters' positions and decisions. Meanwhile, the 'stranger' position represents a form of alienation that allows individuals to maintain a distance from social norms, thereby potentially giving rise to deviant behavior. Conflict in the novel functions as a mechanism within power relations, whilst secrecy becomes a key factor in shaping morality, reputation, and social tension.

Thus, this study confirms that social interaction in literary texts is not merely interpersonal but also serves a structural function in shaping social behavior and meaning. These findings reinforce the role of the sociological approach to literature, particularly Georg Simmel's theory of social interaction, as an effective analytical framework for understanding the relationship between individuals, social structures, and moral dynamics in literary works.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that future research should develop the field of literary sociology by employing different theoretical perspectives in order to enrich the analysis of naturalist literary works. Furthermore, future research could broaden the scope of study by analysing other works in the *Les Rougon-Macquart* series to gain a more comprehensive understanding of patterns of social interaction and the formation of characters' behavior within the context of 19th-century French society.

Furthermore, further research could also consider the use of interdisciplinary approaches, such as literary psychology or power theory, to examine the relationship between social structure, the psychological conditions of characters, and moral dynamics in greater depth. Thus, studies of social interaction in literary works are not limited to relational structures but can also provide a broader perspective on the complexity of the relationship between the individual and society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The use of generative AI tools (e.g., Consensus AI and Claude) or other AI-supported technologies in the preparation of this manuscript must be disclosed by the authors. For instance, during the development of this work, DeepL (version 24.4.3) and Grammarly was employed to enhance linguistic accuracy and readability. All AI-assisted outputs were subsequently reviewed and revised by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and final content of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Berdida, D. J. E., Franco, F. M. C., Santos, X. A. G., Dacol, C. B., Dimaano, M., Rosario, E. S. D., & Lantin, C. C. (2023). Filipinos' COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy comments in TikTok videos: A manifest content analysis. *Public Health Nursing*, 40(1), 135–143. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phn.13143>

- Choirina, R., Nugroho, Y. E., & Nuryatin, A. (2024). Masalah Sosial Dalam Novel Hari Pelarian Karya Yulia Sujarwo: Kajian Sosiologi Sastra. *Basastra: Jurnal Kajian Bahasa Dan Sastra Indonesia*, 13(2), 120–133.
- Cresswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches. *SAGE Publication*, (4th ed).
- Damrosch, D. (2009). *How to Read World Literature*.
- Fraditha, J. E., Kurniawati, N., Sunahrowi, & Yulianto, A. (2023). L'étude de la sociologie-macro de Georg Simmel sur le roman Un Prêtre Marié de Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. *Lingua Litteria Journal*, 10(2). <http://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/lelL'étudedelasociologie-macrodGeorgSimmelsurleromanUnPrêtreMariéde>
- Ginting, B., Hasanah, N., & Pasaribu, D. A. (2024). Telaah Sosiologi Sastra Terhadap Novel “Dinding Retak” Karya Legino Jr : Ditinjau Dari Aspek Sosial Dan Ekonomi. In *Jurnal Serunai Bahasa Indonesia* (Vol. 21, Number 1).
- Julianto, G. S., Hadi, I. P., & Vidyarini, T. N. (2021). Analisis Isi Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication Pandemi COVID-19 pada Facebook Bangsa Surabaya. <https://publication.petra.ac.id/index.php/ilmu-komunikasi/article/view/11491/10099>
- Khakim, L., Wardani, N. E., & Suryanto, E. (2022). Konflik Batin pada Kumpulan Cerpen Pilihan Kompas 2017: Kasur Tanah dan Relevansinya sebagai Bahan Ajar Apresiasi Sastra Indonesia di SMA. *Pena : Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 12(2), 10–23. <https://doi.org/10.22437/pena.v12i2.23165>
- Krippendorff, Klaus. (2004). *Content analysis : an introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE Publication.
- Mahardika, R. N., Ari, H. D. P., Ivani, A., Hakiki, F. S., Neina, Q. A., & Yuniawan, T. (2025). Menggugah Realitas Sosial: Kajian Sosiologi Sastra dalam Novel Laskar Pelangi Sebagai Representasi Ketidakmerataan Pendidikan Indonesia. *Perspektif: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Ilmu Bahasa*, 3(2), 239–256. <https://doi.org/10.59059/perspektif.v3i2.2456>
- Mahendra, P. K. D., Hasanudin, C., & Mujahidin, A. (2022). Sosiolog Sastra dan Nilai Pendidikan Karakter Novel The King Eternal Monarch 1. In *Jurnal Ilmiah Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* (Vol. 1, Number 2).
- Neuendorf, K. A. (2017). The Content Analysis Guidebook. In *The Content Analysis Guidebook*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802878>
- Nurkolis, F. I., & Parmin. (2021). Sosiologi Mikro Dalam Novel Kelir Slindet Sosiologi Mikro Dalam Novel Kelir Slindet Karya Kedung Darma Romansha (Kajian Sosiologi Georg Simmel). <https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/jurnal-sapala/article/view/40476>
- Nurullah, S., & Parmin. (2022). Persoalan Sosial Dalam Novel Cikuya, 15730 Karya Sungging Raga: Kajian Sosiologi Sastra Georg Simmel. *Sapala*.
- Permatasari, F. I., Fitria, E. N., Sholehha, K., & Kanzunnudin, M. (2025). Analisis Pendekatan Psikologis Karakter Cinta Pada Novel Kata Karya Rintik Sedu. *Jurnal Kata : Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pembelajarannya*, 13(1), 428–441. <https://doi.org/10.23960/Kata>
- Simmel, G., Blasi, A. J., Jacobs, A. K., & Kanjirathinkal, M. (2009). *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms, 2 volume set*.
- Stephane, N. (2023). Exploring Social Realities and Identity Struggles through Content Analysis of Dialogues in La Désintégration by Philippe Faucon. In *Global Journal of Cultural Studies* (Vol. 2).

- Sunahrowi, S. (2025). Identity and Muslim Solidarity in French Literature: A Sociological Study of Qu'Allah Bénisse La France by Abd Al Malik. *IBDA` : Jurnal Kajian Islam Dan Budaya*, 23(2), 251–268. <https://doi.org/10.24090/ibda.v23i2.15316>
- Susanto, T. A. A. (2020). *Konflik Antar Tokoh Dalam Roman La Bête Humaine Karya Émile Zola : Tinjauan Dari Teori Konflik Sosial Dean G. Pruitt Dan Jeffrey Z. Rubin*. <http://lib.unnes.ac.id/id/eprint/39671>
- Tarigan, N. B. A., Nasution, I., & Marsella, E. (2024). *Nilai Moral dalam Novel Negeri Para Bedebah Karya Tere Liye : Pendekatan Sosiologi Sastra*. <https://jptam.org/index.php/jptam/article/view/15344/11598>
- Wellek, R., & Warren, A. (1948). *Theory of Literature*. <http://www.archive.org/details/theoryofliteratuOOinwell>
- Widiyanti, A. T., Yulianto, A., Sunahrowi, & Kurniawati, N. (2023). Les réalités sociales dans le roman L'Argent d'Émile Zola: Une étude du structuralisme génétique de Lucien Goldmann. *Lingua Litteria Journal*, (10), 2023. <http://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/lel>
- Wilujeng, D. A., Suaedi, H., & Susetyo, A. M. (2025). Investigating Social Dynamics in the Novel *Gadis Kretek* by Ratih Kumala: A Literary Study of Traditional Cultural Values and Modernity. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 5(1), 163–173. <https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v5i1.2576>
- Wulandari, N. I., Winda, N., Agustina, L., Basataka, J., & Pgri Banjarmasin, S. (2022). *Interaksi Sosial Dalam Novel Anak Rantau Karya A. Fuadi* (Vol. 5, Number 2).
- Zola, É. (1890). *La Bête Humaine*.