

Doctor Pascal Spoiler Thoughts

The titular Doctor Pascal is the younger sibling of Eugène Rougon and Aristide Saccard, and previously appeared as a supporting character in *The Fortune of the Rougons* and *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (the latter of which has perhaps the most in common with this book). Though a member of the aristocratic Rougons, Pascal has always seen himself as being the exception to his family's greedy, corrupt nature—taking his satisfaction only in detached scientific research. Since the night of the 1851 coup twenty years earlier, Pascal has devoted the bulk of his life in Plassans to three pursuits: the study of experimental medicine (with the ludicrous aim of curing all disease), the meticulous compilation of biographies for every member of the Rougon-Macquart-Mouret family tree (which ties into his research on heredity), and the rearing and mentorship of his niece Clotilde sent to him by his brother Saccard at the age of seven (an event referenced in *The Kill*).

Now nearly sixty years of age, Pascal has settled into a comfortable life of semi-retirement—continually fiddling with his powders, solutions, and syringes, testing his dubious concoctions on live patients (it cannot be stressed enough how terrible a doctor he is), and having his every need attended to by Clotilde and his lifelong maid Martine, who both adore him. However, Pascal's reverie is disrupted by the intervention of his scheming mother Félicité, who lives in fear of the comprehensive documents that Pascal keeps on every member of the family. Félicité has become fixated on the destruction of Pascal's files in order to protect the distinguished reputation of the Rougon family from the dirty secrets they might contain, and to this end she begins driving a wedge between the doctor and his two caretakers—hoping to convince them to help her retrieve the wretched documents that preoccupy her so. As a result, a great deal of tension emerges between the rationalistic, atheist-minded Pascal and the more religious-minded Clotilde and Martine, who want only to save his soul. This tension culminates in Clotilde being caught by the doctor trying to steal his files in the dead of night, an event that nearly provokes him to violence against his niece for the first time in his life. Pascal calms himself, however, and decides to recount the entire family history to Clotilde in an attempt to win her back to his side. His plan works, and Clotilde offers him her unconditional love and loyalty.

It is not long after this that the novel takes a rather mortifying turn as Pascal begins an incestuous sexual affair with his twenty-five-year old niece. There is no attempt by Zola's narration to portray this criminal relationship as anything other than sweet and loving; the reader is subjected to pages and pages of stomach-churning detail of how much joy and fulfillment this sickening liaison brings the two mismatched lovebirds. Clotilde is in fact all too happy to offer herself body and mind to her uncle and surrogate father, and Pascal is able to overcome his feelings of impotence with the enthusiastic affections of such a young lover. The doctor and his niece become so proud of their perverse romance that they make no attempt to hide it from the townspeople of Plassans, flaunting their incest in broad daylight for all to see. Pascal and Clotilde thus become the subject of a great

scandal in town, which causes the reputation-obsessed Félicité to move to separate them. Through a combination of guile, circumstance, and airtight argumentation, the unlikely hero Félicité succeeds in breaking up this shameful affair and Clotilde is then sent to Paris to live with her dissipated brother Maxime.

After months of separation, Clotilde informs Pascal that she is pregnant and intends to return to him so they may raise their child together. The doctor is overjoyed at the news, but suddenly falls ill and dies before his niece/mistress can return. Félicité and the maid Martine then take this opportunity to burn all of Pascal's dreaded documents, ensuring that the incriminating secrets of the Rougon family will be taken to the grave. Clotilde is deeply distraught by the death of her uncle/father/mentor/lover and the destruction of his life's work, but ultimately gives birth to a seemingly healthy baby boy and resolves to devote the rest of her life to raising him. Pascal's final legacy is thus tied up in this inbred whelp whom Zola bewilderingly imbues with hope for the future.

I found *Doctor Pascal* excruciatingly difficult to finish because of its vile subject matter. There were moments of discomfort for me in the previous nineteen novels—mostly whenever Zola's fetish for alarmingly young girls and dubious ideas of consent made themselves known—but nothing like the full-throated endorsement of grooming and incest that is at the heart of this final novel. I believe Zola quite lost his mind when he wrote *Doctor Pascal*, and were it not for a series of tumultuous events in his own love life that occurred around the time of its writing, we may have ended up with a very different story indeed. To elaborate: Zola began an affair with his twenty-one-year-old maid Jeanne in the late 1880s (when he was almost 50) and eventually got her pregnant, which he had been unable to achieve with his wife. After a couple of years, Zola's wife Alexandrine learned about the affair and flew into a rage, breaking into the mistress' home (which Zola had procured for her), smashing several pieces of furniture, and burning several letters sent to Jeanne by her husband. Zola and his wife were eventually able to reach an understanding over his relationship with Jeanne and he was permitted to continue the affair, splitting his time between the two women from then on. When it finally came time to write *Doctor Pascal*, Zola based the character of Clotilde on his mistress and dedicated the book to his wife, cementing his place in history as one of the most terminally French men to ever walk the Earth.

It's obvious that Zola's desire to map his own romance troubles onto his self-insert character Pascal clouded his judgement about how much more radically objectionable Pascal and Clotilde's affair would scan compared to his own. While Zola's misconduct was fairly egregious, his mistress was not a blood relation and he did not raise her (or even know her) from childhood. Conversely, Pascal's inability to see Clotilde as his daughter despite adopting her at age seven is one of the most distressing aspects of their relationship. And by engaging in this incestuous, completely self-indulgent affair with Clotilde, Pascal—who has spent his entire life defining himself by how different he was from his debauched family—proves himself to be a Rougon in the end after all (a fact which he does acknowledge just before his death to the book's credit).

More troublingly, for all Pascal's (and Zola's) preoccupation with tracking hereditary disorders across the R-M family tree, he seems to have conveniently forgotten one of the most fundamental laws of inheritance: it is the homogeneity of genes that leads to the proliferation of the most severe genetic defects. By engaging in an act of inbreeding with his niece, Pascal is ensuring that the worst elements of his bloodline will be carried forward into the future, where they will surely wreak havoc on his descendants even if they do not have an immediate impact on his son. Speaking of whom, Zola and Clotilde share a great deal of optimism about the future of Pascal's child since he is strong and healthy (in contrast to the debilitatingly sickly children of Claude, Nana, Hèlène, and Maxime), but we are given one small clue at the very last that seems to reveal Zola's unconscious doubts about the child's temperament:

"But by now the baby had drained her right breast dry and, since he was getting cranky, Clotilde turned him round and gave him her left breast. Then she started to smile again, tickled by the greedy little gums." (pg. 295)

And there it is: another ravenous appetite waiting to be unleashed on the world, another Rougon ready to drain the Earth dry of its milk. The excesses and hungers awakened by the Second Empire do not end with its fall, but continue unbroken through every subsequent era into the current day. The Rougons are now legion, and we dwell in a world tailored to the whims of their immortal appetites.