

BALZAC, HONORE DE

Balzac, Honoré de: importance for French literature. Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) was a French novelist, playwright, and author of a long sequence of short stories and novels, *La Comédie humaine*, *The Human Comedy*, in which he left the world a fascinating and influential portrait of many aspects of French society in the year following 1815 and the fall of Napoleon.

The life of Balzac. Honore de Balzac was born at Tarn, in the south of France. His family was rather poor, and his father eager to teach Honore a frugal life style; the results were a pinched youth for the young man, who got used to being laughed at in school, for the limited spending money he had available. The College to which he was sent was the College de Vendome in his native city, but while there he was indifferent to his studies—except when it came to voracious reading, which he devoured during his prolonged and regular periods of detention. After graduation he was sent to Tours, where he became an apprentice in a law office. (This effort bored Balzac, who found himself exhausted by the experience of the ups and downs of ordinary human existence, but who learned vastly for his future literary work.) After this venture he gave up law, and several other unsuccessful business ventures, for a life in literature, though not without having paid his dues to the educational system. He studied at the Sorbonne, where he had distinguished and stimulating Professors, and by 1845 he was beginning to make a considerable living from his books. He plunged into the writing life with an amazing fervor, than which nothing else could have driven him to the vast achievement of his fictional world. In 1850 he married a wealthy Polish countess, but died of a heart disease a few months after the wedding.

Balzac's work and style. The masterpiece of Balzac's life was the *Comédie Humaine*. It was not until 1830-1834 that he clearly formulated a plan to write a comprehensive and detailed sketch of all French life. Just as Dante's *Divine Comedy* had portrayed the denizens of all the regions of hell, purgatory, and paradise, so *The Human Comedy* would depict every sort of person on earth, or at least in France. He planned to fit all his novels—those already written as well as those to come—into one great cycle. Into this framework he poured ninety five titles, and planned approximately fifty five more, which he did not live to write. The amount he did write, however, was overwhelming—more than four million words, containing over two thousand characters, of whom about five hundred appear in more than one story. Some of the stories are merely short tales; some novelettes; others full length novels. In an effort to reproduce the real, Balzac often begins his fictions with long and tedious expositions. Often he inserts digressions for the purpose of expounding his pet theories or of convincing the reader of the authenticity of his account. Frequently his narration is in the first person. In the novels dealing with social groups he uses complex plots. In the novels of character, however, the plots are simple, and the details of characterization are sometimes accumulated till a caricature results. Often there is one trait which dominates a person, and so drives him to distraction. For example, Father Goriot's paternal devotion almost turns into criminal indulgence; Grandet's love for gold becomes a mania; and Cousin Bette's envy and jealousy are her undoing.

Reading

Primary source reading

Old Man Goriot, tr. McCannon and Robb, 2011.

Secondary source reading

Brook, Peter, *Realist Vision*, 2005.

Further reading

Lehan, Richard, *Realism and Naturalism*, 2005.

Original language reading

Maurois, A., *Prométhée ou la vie de Balzac*, 1965.

Suggested paper topics

You are aware of the huge fictional universe Balzac created around him. Do you suppose this kind of capacious imagination, which has rarely been equaled—in France the only rivals might be Victor Hugo or Emile Zola—blots out the real world, so that the author substitutes fictive values for real, in his work? Would that apply to Balzac?

Does Balzac in his fiction display the kind of large hearted sympathy for the poor, the losers, of his society which we associated with the work of Victor Hugo? Is there a tone in Balzac such as that we hear in Hugo's *Les Misérables*?

Excerpt

<http://racheltapley.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/translation-excerpt-from-balzacs-the-unknown-masterpiece/>

Strictly speaking, drawing does not exist! Don't laugh, young man! However strange this idea might seem to you, one day you'll understand the reasons behind it. The line is the way man realizes the effect of light on objects; but there are no lines in nature, where everything is full: it's by modeling that we draw, that is to say, we detach things from the environment where they are, only the distribution of light gives the body its appearance! So I have not fixed the lines, I have spread over the contours a cloud of blond, warm middle tints which makes it so that you cannot put a finger on where exactly the contours meet the background. From close, this work seems cloudy and appears to lack precision, but from two steps back, everything becomes firm, fixed and detached; the body turns, the forms begin to stand out, you feel the air circulate all around. And yet I am still not content, I have doubts.