

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will. Ph.D.

Le Pere Goriot (1835) HONORE DE BALZAC (1799-1850)

OVERVIEW

Author Honore de Balzac was already, by the time of his early fiction, making a mark on the Parisian literary scene. He had written numerous short stories, potboiler fictions, and plays. (By the time of *Le Pere Goriot* he had published one significant novel, *La Peau de Chagrin*, which had attracted wide attention. Already in *Le Pere Goriot* Balzac envisaged the strategy of recycling characters from one fiction to the next, in view of a grand rubric, *La Comedie Humaine*, under which to envisage the author's oeuvre as a whole. By the time Balzac completes this project, he has created an interhatched character texture, which he is able to consider as, in itself, a mini social world.

Text *Le Pere Goriot* is perhaps the most illustrious of Balzac's vast number of fictions. The introduction to LE PERE GORIOT is an introduction to a socio-cultural world, through a sampling of seven to ten characters drawn from diverse parts of Paris and even from French society at large. And the setting we find here takes us back into literary history. ~~s-in that world~~ The kind of sampling and opening we see here might take our minds back to Chaucer and the *Tabard Inn* or to Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or to the social tales of Marguerite de Navarre, who in the *Heptameron* ~~Boccaccio~~ brings together a chance group of way-faring tale-tellers. All of the ~~sem~~ tale tellers were masters at referencing the tenor ~~characterizing~~ of a grand swathe of history. but none adopts, like Balzac, the technique of drawing repeatable characters from various texts, so as to create the impression that one and the same single world lies behind all of his novels. We will have more to say about this technique under our section on themes.

Le Pere Goriot belongs among the *Scenes de la vie privee* section of Balzac's *La Comedie Humaine*. That is to say that the present text is not to be read or thought about in isolation, as though it was an isolated novel. It is rather part of a sequence of interlocking perspectives onto what Balzac calls 'the human condition,' and which, in his case, means the condition of man in the early modern phases of the Industrial Revolution—the to us tangibly recognizable period marked by urbanism, flight from villages and the rural, and the decline of organized religion. Monarchy was palpably losing what charm and power it had. increasingly efficient and productive use of machinery was helping to turn the social world into the economically competitive channels that make up our world today. The tech world was barely visible on the horizon.

Background Like others of the early works of Balzac, the present text was first produced serially during the winter of 1834-5, and is set in the year 1819. The setting of the work, in a forty year old boarding house, provided abundant opportunity to introduce the themes and events of the day. The Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy was at this time forcing attention to matters of class, individual struggle, and on the other side to poverty and the struggles of the individual to carve a private space for himself in society. There were sudden fortunes and swift bankruptcies.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Le pere Goriot. Aging vermicelli manufacturer; father of two daughters.
Eugene de Rastignac Young man from the provinces ; socially ambitious and on the make.
Vautrin. A jovial criminal, caught and arrested in the course of the novel.
Madame Vauquer. Owner and organizer of the boarding house, a pudgy yet hardened widow.
Sylvie Cook at boarding house. Lives on top floor.
Christophe Handyman at boarding house.
Mlle. Michonneau. A stingy, retiring old maid
Mme. Couture. Widow of general, ray of sunshine. A good spirit.
Victorine Taillefer. Beautiful girl. Crush on Rastignac.
Blanchot. Usurer. Medical student and friend of Rastignac. Also a usurer.

SYNOPSIS

Le Pere Goriot is a novel set in early nineteenth century Paris, reflecting the turmoil of French society and culture after a few decades of bruising cultural dissolution, that had seen the system of monarchy seriously challenged, temporarily overwhelmed by the Napoleonic Revolution, and once again, at the time of the present fiction, in the midst of making a brief comeback. The present text, that is, is part of Balzac's immense *Comédie humaine* sequence, which aspires to address the human condition.

The societal turmoil, promoted by the state of affairs in this transitional nation, constitutes the marrow of the present realistic novel. The primary setting is a boarding house in Paris, run for forty years by a widow named Mme. Vauquer, and gathering a diverse assortment of boarders from all corners of the city.

The core of the narrative concerns three central figures—Father Goriot himself, Vautrin, an engaging mid life criminal, and Rastignac, a young man from the provinces, who is looking hard for a social upgrade into high Parisian society. The interrelations among these three characters spin out the bulk of the plot. Ultimately the death of Goriot brings the drama to a close.

SCENES

In the boarding house We are in a boarding house, an institution perfectly suited to gather individuals from several corners of a city or work community, each on his or her life path, but each at least temporarily rooted in that unique location, not just in any boarding house, but in one that is here described—smell sound sight—down to the last detail.

Conversation It goes without discussion that conversation provides the glue of the boardinghouse mini community, and that the formation of cliques, interest groups and antipathies plays a large part in the drama that transpires.

Air of Romance Mme. Vauquer, the proprietess of the boarding house, takes a liking to le Pere Goriot, overvaluing his wealth and thinking of him as a potential husband. Her widow friend joins her in reviewing the marital possibilities.

Daily Life at the boarding house The residents of the boarding house have little binding them except their residence at the house of Mme. Vauquer, 'an elderly person who for the past forty years has kept a lodging house in the rue Neuve-Sainte Genevieve district that lies between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel.'

The historical moment The year is 1819—a year marked by contentious national elections in France-- by an effort to stamp legislative stability on the just post Napoleonic era—and by the trademarks of a new bourgeois culture which are everywhere making themselves felt. The aftermath of Napoleon is palpable.

Bourgeois poverty Mme. Vauquer's house boards a diversity of mid to lower class Parisians thrown together by chance or destiny. It is of particular interest to Balzac to bear down on the weight of history, poverty, and loss in the small corner of time he sets aside for this book's realistic portrait.

The tone of the author The author takes great pains to remind us that the bitter world he portrays is 'the real world,' that this drama he is about to offer us is 'neither a fiction nor a romance! ' ' All is true, so true that everyone can discern the elements of the tragedy in his own house, perhaps in his own heart.'

Setting and language. It is as though the conversations of these dramatis personae peel off the threadbare and grimy walls and furniture of this three story house full of lives and objects fixed by the author's tireless exactitude of language. The boarding house is a palpable relic of ordinary days.

The author as stylist Balzac relies tirelessly, throughout his text, on his crafty ear, and seems endlessly able to invent new situations that lay precisely the right emphasis on his meaning.

'That old bat always makes me shudder,' said Bianchon in a low voice...indicating Mlle Michonneau...I have studied Gall's system, and I am sure she has the bump of Judas...'

How it looks in the boarding house 'The oilcloth which covers the long table is so greasy that a waggish externe will write his name on the surface using his thumb-nail as a style.' Blended with such an atmosphere of desuetude histories soon begin to intersect, and to build a collective tale 1

Balzac busy with tale spinning In the course of Balzac's narration three characters come conspicuously to the front of the story. They are all residents of the boarding house and yet they all have lived Balzac's challenge to put into action the dynamism of his characters. How will he do that? We hear him planning as we read him.

How, as a writer, do you motivate your characters to interact with one another? Balzac tends to do that through conversation. Questions lead to answers lead to ideas lead to new narrative pathways. Vautrin asks Rastignac if he needs ready cash in order to pursue his social ambitions. Rastignac, a bit naïf still, falls at first, then is brought to realize that Vautrin is expressing his willingness to kill (in a duel) anyone who would interfere in Vautrin's efforts to help his friend.

Goriot's daughter Delphine, Goriot's younger daughter, pays a visit to her father and arouses huge curiosity in the boarding house. Who is she in her elegant gown? Suspicions toward Goriot are rampant and everyone is ready to think the worst of him.

Spite against Goriot. Once Mme. Vauquer has come to realize that Goriot has no romantic interest in her, she treats him spitefully and cuts back on the comforts. She provides him no more condiments at the dinner table. She joins other residents in mocking him.

Goriot's decline begins As Goriot's finances dwindle he asks to be moved to an upper, and less expensive, floor in the boarding house. As he makes this move, contempt for the old man grows. What has he to offer? Why is he becoming such a threat to the boarding house? He has in fact no secrets to hide, except the accruing knowledge of the outrageous behavior of his daughters.

The appearance of Goriot's second daughter, Anasiasie As scorn for Goriot increases, suspicions grow concerning his second elegant daughter. Who is she, after all? Is she respectable? Mme. Vauquer begins to worry about the reputation of her house. It is already a hotbed of gossip.

Mme. Vauquer finally tires. She concludes that Goriot's visitors are his mistresses, and she redoubles her efforts to promote scorn of the old man. We are not made privy, to how much Mme. Vauquer cares about the very existence of Old Goriot, or about the lives of his daughters.

Decline in Goriot's appearance. No one can fail to notice the decline in Goriot's appearance. The old man is increasingly marginalized in the boarding house community. We must wonder how capable he is, at this point, of explaining his situation to others? Or even to himself? Is he aware that he is shuffling around the boarding house in a ragged frock coat and shabby trousers?

Rastignac falls for Goriot's daughter. Rastignac prepares himself for social success, and develops serious intentions toward Delphine. They become figures around town. The plot web opens and we can begin to establish narrative linkages between the boarding house residents and figures in the 'outside world.' This is the way Balzac's tight plotting unfolds.

Vautrin tempts Rastignac. Vautrin offers Rastignac a plan for making quick money. He will fight a duel, against the guy blocking Rastignac's path to a dowry. He will kill for Rastignac. But Rastignac takes a stand for honor, refusing Vautrin's proposal. He saves Goriot from any involvement with a criminal enterprise. Vautrin has stepped beyond the pale.

Vautrin is wanted by the police. It turns out that Vautrin has a lengthy rap sheet, and that although he is a charming man of the world, he is willing to stoop even to murder in order to 'help a friend.' This is the kind of underground figure that fascinates Balzac.

Goriot learns the full truth. By a process of boardinghouse osmosis, Goriot learns the full truth of the unsavory lives of his daughters, and of their high society spouses and lovers. The gossip, corruption and dishonesty of his daughters is too much, and he collapses with a stroke.

On his deathbed. Even while threatened by death Goriot lies fulminating against his daughters and against their dirty lives living with the elite of Paris. *Goriot dies, his daughters absent from his funeral. He rails, to the end, over the infidelity of his offspring.*

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

FATHER GORIOT / LE PERE GORIOT

Overview *Le Pere Goriot* is perhaps the most illustrious of Balzac's vast number of fictions. The introduction to this novel, is an introduction to a socio-cultural world, through a sampling of fifteen or twenty characters drawn from diverse parts of Paris and even from French society at large. And the setting we find here takes us back into literary history, as well. The kind of sampling and opening we see here might have derived from Marguerite de Navarre, who in the *Heptameron* brings together a chance group of way faring tale-tellers. All of these tale tellers were masters of history, but none adopts, like Balzac, the technique of using repeatable characters from various texts, so as to create the impression that one and the same single world lies behind all of his novels.

Character *Goriot.* Le pere Goriot, as Goriot is both fondly and indeed sometimes scornfully called, throughout Balzac's novel, is a haunting figure, whose destiny intersects with social themes of his time--and ours--especially with retirement- living issues. We first meet Goriot shortly after he has moved into a large boarding house in central Paris, a house owned and run by Madame Vauquer, a late mid-life widow. We know little about Goriot at this point, and for some time he is to remain little known or understood by the residents at Mme Vauquer's house. (A house, to make it clear, of some eighteen residents, whose principal meeting point was the dining table, three times a day, in the rather seedy lounges surrounding the dining room, or in the small garden on the hill at the back of the house.)

In 1813, when he was sixty nine, Father Goriot sold his business and retired to Mme. Vauquer's boarding house. He had brought with him a considerable wardrobe, such that Mme. Vauquer had quickly, and erroneously, concluded that the gentleman was of some weight and import and should be lodged in one of the finest rooms in the house. That was her opinion. The household opinion of Goriot steadily declined as his true story became widely known and generated another, and proximate, tale. By the time we meet the gentleman he is in fact the butt of the house's ridicule. It is known to all the residents that Goriot has blown all his money to support his two daughters, who were married and prosperous. That seemed to make him a bit of a fool. But that realization comes full blown only gradually and not until various stages of attitude to Goriot have transpired.

Parallels The most evident parallel, to the situation in which Goriot finds himself, is that in which Shakespeare's King Lear finds himself when, upon deciding to relinquish the crown, and draw up his will, he turns to his three daughters. He asks them directly whether they love him, and will support him in his abdication. Two of his daughters make it super clear that they love their father to the end, while the third, Cordelia, declares her love and lasting support to her father, but without sucking up to him, or letting it be insinuated that they will be glad to get back to their families and castles.

Goriot, shall we say, is less lucky than Lear. Goriot's daughters, whom we see chiefly as elegant flying vignettes, in and out of the boarding house. give no evidence of concern for their father, who has devoted his elderly years to supporting them. In the end this neglect will be fatal to Goriot. As for the dramaturgy, of working with this touchy parallel, it must be said that while one father is sacrificing all, for his daughters, the other is simply thinking of the politics of the possible, how to deal with the incoming French fleet.

Illustrative Moments

New kid on the block. Entering the assemblage of some eighteen fellow Parisians, most in their twenties and thirties, and tradesworkers for the most part, Goriot is decidedly an unknown—a mature businessman unknown to all and an individual with little identity. He is not especially sociable, and yet his

mere presence in that environment makes him an object of gossip and curiosity. It is not long before he has opened up to a couple of male friends who will prove to be major players in the drama. But at the beginning he is a new kid on the block. *Landlady*. Mme. Vauquer, the widow owner of the boarding house, is the first to develop her curiosity about Goriot. From the time of his arrival, she and two or three women friends in the pension have thought this senior figure somewhat attractive.

A loving and faithful man. As Balzac builds up the character of Goriot, we stand beside Mme. Vauquer and wonder whence the fine appointments, which have entered the boarding house, have come into these modest quarters. In terse conversation with Mme. Vauquer Goriot reveals that the finery he has brought to the boarding house consists of precious relics of his marriage to Mme. Goriot. This disclosure, once introduced into the texture of the novel, opens a vein of sentimentality which will help us to understanding Goriot's attitude and behavior toward his daughters. Goriot is a loving and faithful man. He is a sentimentalist, old school.

Reticent. Goriot remains reluctant to disclose the secrets of his private life. A crux in his pattern of secrecy appears at last from the midst of his growing friendship with his fellow boarder, young Rastignac. The latter asks Goriot what has led him to lodge in such a dump as Mme. Vauquer's. At that point, exceptionally, Goriot tells the story of his wife's death—the recounting moves him deeply—and of his daughters' situation in life. Goriot confesses to Rastignac that he feels lonely and isolated. From there he goes on to talk about his daughters. Gradually the truth works its way out through the entire boarding house.

Discussion questions

What is the emotional tenor of Balzac as he creates the present tale? Are his human emotions with Goriot, who has been a victim of poor filial attitudes? Does Balzac feel any particular affection for the other residents of Mme. Vauquer's boarding house?

Would you say that Balzac is showing us examples of *La Comedie Humaine*, without feeling the need to evaluate that 'condition'? When we think back to Dante and Chaucer, in their magisterial efforts to encompass the human condition, do we face perhaps the same kind of 'authorial objectivity' that we face with Balzac? Are we not in touch, here, with the perennial coldness of great art?

Does Balzac create as an historian, as well as an artist? He is writing at a time of very considerable social-political turmoil, very shortly after the defeat of Napoleon, in the midst of efforts by the Bourbon monarchy to regain power, and of the bourgeois roi, Louis Philippe, to tone down a society in confusion or turmoil. Or does his ambitious desire to characterize the human condition as a whole seem like the work of a mind concentrating on a stability and completeness in his world?

Does Balzac have a sense of humor, or would we say that he has, rather, a leaning toward social satire? What about the cabal between Mme. Vauquer and her widowed friend, over the possible manly attractions of Goriot, even over his marriageability? There is at least a dry current of cattiness at work in such conversation. The irony replace bold humor.

RASTIGNAC Eugene de Rastignac is a fairly inexperienced law student from the south of France. He was, and appeared, a young man of fashion, aristocratic in profile, but like most student types, doing the Parisian milieu in order to get their professional credentials, he tended to wear 'a shabby coat and waistcoat.' But this was simply an affectation. He was keenly interested in breaking into Parisian high society. His personal entanglements will ultimately involve him with those of other residents of the Maison Vauquer. And in the end it will be he who is one of the few faithful enough to attend Goriot's funeral. This is not the only point at which Rastignac belongs to the Goriot story.

In Love The plot among these three major players quickly thickens. Rastignac is the first driving force. He is an ambitious young southerner, with aristocratic connections, and ambitions to insert himself into the world of elite Parisian culture. His first breakthrough occurs with the help of his cousin, Mme. de Beauseant, who undertakes to instruct him in the ways of the upper class. Rastignac falls in love with one of Goriot's daughters, Delphine—thereby establishing the first narrative bridge of the novel. The issue of Rastignac's ambitions has just been opened, until Vautrin comes along with his counter proposal, a lovely

young lady named Victorine. The only problem is Victorine's brother, who will block the availability of the lady's wealth.

Resists crime Smitten by love for Delphine, one of Goriot's daughters, Rastignac looks around for a strategy which will advance his social class hungry ambitions. The strategy in question finally comes from Vautrin, the jovial but criminal fellow resident of the boarding house. The suggestion from Vautrin is that Rastignac should find another choice to follow toward fame and fortune...and when he makes that choice, he should let Vautrin figure out how to dispose of any male challenges. At Vautrin's prompting, Rastignac falls in love with another beautiful woman; likes the look of her dowry too; and is given a plan by Vautrin. This plan, however, is the stopping point for Rastignac, and tells us all we need to know about the difference between Vautrin and Rastignac. Vautrin offers to kill the lady's brother, chief custodian of her dowry—in a duel. This suggestion is a step too far for Rastignac, who sees no path for murder on his path toward wealth and beauty.

VAUTRIN Vautrin, a man of forty who breathes solid masculine know-how, was a creature of Balzac's intense interest in the demi-world of crime. The complexities of the criminal mind fascinated him. 'A jovial sort, Vautrin had broad shoulders, a well-developed chest, muscular arms, and strong square-fisted hands; the joints of his fingers were covered with tufts of fiery red hair...' 'He knew all about ships, the sea, France, foreign countries, men, business, law, great houses and prisons...' In the end he will prove himself the criminal he is, but not without charming us by his ingenuity.

THEMES

Social Order The boarding house is a model microcosm. Entrance to the society of the boarding house is relatively easy, requiring usually only a modest monthly down payment. (Boarding houses are typically a modest form of lodging, and have seen their day, in the bustling age of condensation and inflation. In the older urban populations of the United States, like Philadelphia or Boston, the elderly and relatively impecunious still close up their lives in these behemoths.) Balzac burrowed into the heyday of this institution, and with his perfect sense for historical atmosphere carried the tenor of his historical moment directly into Mme Vauquer's establishment. Within that house, as we discover, ages and genders are mixed and the normal gossip of the street is kept fully alive. Life throbs in Mme. Vauquer's establishment, and there is a constant jockeying for better rooms and better condiments,

Mutual Obligations of parents and children Such obligations are not put down in law, and furthermore vary sharply from one culture to another. (The western industrialized cultures stress the freedom and responsibility of children to make their own paths through life, while African children tend to more dependence and their parents to more responsibility. In the case of Goriot himself, however, parental responsibility is damagingly foremost, and spoiled children seem to run away with the profits. From where does Goriot derive his obligation to prioritize his daughters at all costs? Is it a cultural inheritance? Is it an obligation of Goriot to his late wife? In the end do we feel that pure love, from the heart, is an element in Goriot's behavior?

Filial love The deepest emotional drama of the novel transpires between Goriot and his daughters. We gradually realize that the glamorous ladies visiting the elderly man are his daughters, and that they come only on rare occasions to see their secretive dad. At the same time we realize that Goriot has devoted his own capital—as a vermicelli maker—to supporting the two girls. Two versions of social obligation clash here, and we inevitably feel that the Father is sacrificing himself to selfish and self-interested offspring. If there is any single theme in Balzac's tale, it will have to be ingratitude. We have to assume that these morally rotten daughters—for such they turn out to be—visit their dad to fatten their purses, while we know as a certainty that their dad wastes away with caring for them. 'So much for filial love, says Balzac.

Literature and Life The relationship of Goriot to his daughters reminds us of the treatment Shakespeare gave to the theme of filial responsibility in *King Lear*. It will be remembered that Lear had three daughters, of whom two remained indifferent to the old man as he declined into old age, while one of them, Cordelia, remained faithful to the father. This state of affairs clearly parallels that of Goriot's daughters to Goriot, except that Goriot had no Cordelia to soothe him. Goriot, in fact, had no close acquaintance with him at his deathbed, except Rastignac, no relative. What is to be said for drawing the

present parallel, which is the kind of collective tissue we often find joining works of literature or of the other arts? For one thing we learn by discovering the close relation of literature to life. It is valuable to reflect on the value of literature to teach us about life, but it is also valuable to be reminded that life needs literature, as a space in which to mirror and reflect on itself.

Realism in Literature Balzac is called a realist because he gives us a keen sense of the intimacy between imaginative language and the things in the world. When Balzac describes the 'hairs on Vautrin's knuckles,' adding that they are fiery red, we see through the language into a common feeling, tie ourselves into an observation which has tangible meaning for us. When we speak of the road as a 'ribbon of moonlight' we invite ourselves to feel the road through our eyes. Just as Whistler taught us to discover the London fog, so the skilled poet helps us to discover the world. With immense daring, Balzac took it on himself to reach out, in *La comédie humaine*, to a depiction of the whole of the human situation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the emotional tenor of Balzac as he creates the present tale? Are his human emotions with Goriot, who has been a victim of poor filial attitudes? Does Balzac feel any particular affection for the residents of Mme. Vauquer's boarding house? Would you prefer, to either of the above descriptions, simply to say that Balzac is showing us examples of *La Comédie Humaine*, without feeling the need to evaluate that 'condition.'? When we think back to Dante and Chaucer, in their magisterial efforts to encompass the human condition, do we face perhaps the same 'authorial objectivity that we face with Balzac?

Does Balzac create as an historian, as well as an artist? He is writing at a time of very considerable social-political turmoil, very shortly after the defeat of Napoleon, and in the midst of efforts by the Bourbon monarchy to regain power. Does Balzac present to us a society in confusion or turmoil? Or does his ambitious desire to characterize the human condition as a whole seem like the work of a mind concentrating on a stability and completeness in his world?

Does Balzac have a sense of humor, or would we say that he has, rather, a leaning toward social satire.? What about the cabal between Mme. Vauquer and her widowed friend, over the possible manly attractions of Goriot, even over his marriageability? There is at least a dry current of cattiness at work in such conversation. The lilt of irony replaces bold humor whenever possible. Balzac excels in beginners' attempts at Romantic conversation, and naturally thrives on the verbal naivete of a Rastignac, who is just beginning to learn the rules of the social game. Following provocative remarks by Goriot's daughter, Mme. Nucingen, the lady assures the young arriviste that the two of them would soon be friends, to which he, flustered, responds:

'Although a friendship with you could not be like an ordinary friendship, I should never wish to be your friend.'

To which Balzac adds the comment: Such stereotyped phrases as these, in the mouths of beginners, possess an unerring charm for women. Balzac never misses the social nuance that flies close to broad humor.

Does *Le Pere Goriot* seem to you to belong to its own time specifically, or is it a text 'for the ages,' or, alternately, does it have a peculiar relevance to our own time and place, well into our moment a century later?

Balzac's novel is a testimony to time worn human interrelations, which could play out in numerous places and times. The boarding house of 1820 Paris brought together a random populace to whom the pathos of Goriot would have been abundantly tangible. *King Lear* is evidence for the fluent adaptability of the Goriot thematic, two hundred years before Balzac's work. And at our moment, in which issues of retirement community living are as widespread as the family system itself, there would be no lack of understanding for the vermicelli (or bond) salesman forgotten by his children and abandoned to lonely misunderstandings. (Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) is evidence for our acute sensitivity to the Goriot theme.) As the family unravels, the pathos of the survivors grows increasingly touching.