

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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# **Cousin Betty** (1846)

Honore de Balzac

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Style, in Balzac, is intimately connected with realism. It might be said that this writer's style follows his realism. The National Guardsman in his milord is so comfortable as he makes his conspicuous journey through the Parisian suburb, the felicity of his speech and of his self-awareness shine around him, sufficiently that ladies smiling as he passes reoccupy vast dream states of amor. The slightly shaky assuredness of this same M. Crevel, as he approaches his target's residence, leaves us feeling our own breathlessness toward the impending encounter, bringing together two fatefully interlocked families, between whom a novel of bitterness will unfold. Having framed this jaunty milord ride, with seething conflict and ominous implications, Balzac pulls back for a few breaths, after a masterfully stylish introduction. His style has properly followed in the wake of his realism.

**Text** Balzac's technique evolves potently, as his overwhelming power at novel making grows through its stages. Take for example the series of closely spaced novels—*La Peau de Chagrin* (1831), *Eugenie Grandet* (1833), *Le pere Goriot* (1835), *Cousin Betty* (1846). Look at the verbal passageways through which we enter into each of these texts. Introductions have been telling entryways into highly plotted literature since the time of Homer and Vergil. Balzac creates a private skill out of this mini genre. We can see in the above four instances gradations of entry approach. In *La Peau de Chagrin* we enter arm in arm, as it were, into the late afternoon casino, in which the desperate *Raphael is about to throw his life on the line*. In *Eugenie Grandet* we are gradually introduced into stoney mansions in which a young lady is growing up isolated and lonely. In *Le pere Goriot* we meet Goriot himself through the largely scornful observations of him made by his fellow boarders. *Cousin Betty* is introduced to us as a marginal, sulking figure who will exercise a malign will. The introductory functions of these four novels grow increasingly interior and minatory, as Balzac moves into his authentic energy.

**Background** It is impossible to overestimate the power of the cultural and social change that swept across Europe and America in the late eighteenth century. It is as though before that time—before the French and then the Napoleonic Revolutions, before the American Revolution—a loose but inescapable set of assumptions governed practice in the arts and social decorum where traditions long tailored to emotional discipline, aesthetic control and to propriety were given at least respectful attention. In short the stocks in trade of the new novel, and in particular the novel of realism, like Balzac's, were sure to fascinate and repel in almost equal degrees. They lay at a cultural crossroad, on the far, realistic side of which we find not only knuckles covered with bright red hair, but new social configurations, like Lesbianism, which portend wide new horizons of social possibility. The novel before us will introduce us to the new whiff of the world on the far side of the great historical divide.

During the period in which the present novel was created, Balzac was as always writing at a frenetic pace, leading a lavish lifestyle which was beginning to carve inroads into his health and finances. He was at this point writing full scale independent fictions—in 1829 he published *Les Chouans*, the first book under his own name—but he was also writing for more than the potboiler circuit, into which he had already poured abundant youthful energies. His personal background was, as we can suspect, attracting attention as well as readership, and in the eighteen thirties brought him into contact with an infatuated readership.

That readership included a Polish admirer, Mme. Hanska, with whom Balzac carried on a maturing love relationship, until in 1846 she became pregnant, and suffered a miscarriage, which was then more than their relationship could endure. The more than personal background France displayed, at this stage in Balzac's personal writing, furnishes a fermentation of feverish creativity. The passage from King Charles X to Louis King of the French served as an indicator that the new bourgeois middle class life was taking

over, and that the aristocratic mandates were no longer being heard. This situation made for the kind of fascinating social turmoil that was precisely up Balzac's alley.

The novel before us is a perfect example of intersecting upper-class and bourgeois relations. The prolonged introductory scene of the book, which carries us in a milord through the streets of Paris, and Adeline Hulot's upscale home, enfold by contrast a successful bourgeois perfumer—M. Crevel,— in process of visiting a high bred lady on matters concerning the marriage of their daughter and son, respectively. What scenarios could be richer, for their evocation of the juxtaposition of cultures old and new? A perfumer? A perfumer subsequently risen through the ranks of the Army National Guard? And a lady born to the Upper Noblesse?

## CHARACTERS

**M, Crevel**, bitter because Baron Hulot has stolen his mistress, tries to seduce Adeline, the most virtuous of all. Involved in many affairs around town, he eventually marries the seductive Valerie. He and she die, not much later, of a mysterious disease.

**Baroness Adeline Hulot**, long suffering wife of Baron Hulot, principal spokesperson for virtue in the novel; her faith in God remains firm. She is in fact the one stalwart supporter of decency in the novel.

**Cousin Betty**, the cousin of Adeline, regularly looked down on as an Old Maid. Finally falls in love with a Polish sculptor named Steinbock. Betty vows revenge when Steinbock falls in love with Adeline's lovely daughter, Hortense. Betty plans a subtle revenge. She introduces both Steinbock and Baron Hulot to her wily seductress friend, Valerie. The plan succeeds, and both men fall in love with Valerie, ruining their respective families.

**Victorin Hulot**, the son of Baron Hulot, becomes an upstanding young gentleman. He is the true aristocrat in the gene pool, 'to the manor born.'

**Valerie Marneffe**. Is a notorious beauty around town, with a reputation such as that required to stage her family vengeance plan with Cousin Bette. In the end she ends up marrying the calculating Crevel, from the beginning of the novel.

**Baron Montes Montejanos**. A gallant Brazilian nobleman, the only person Valerie truly loves. In fact he grows passionately jealous of Valerie.

**Marechal Hulot**. The elder brother of Baron Hulot, and a man of honor and distinction. Cousin Betty wins his respect and becomes his housekeeper. They marry but he dies a few days later, for which she feels responsible.

**Johann Fischer**. Adeline's fraudulent uncle. Arrested for dishonest actions. Commits suicide.

**Josepha**. Beautiful singer at the Opera, for a while Crevel's mistress. Baron Hulot steals Josepha away from Crevel.

**Dr. Blanchon**. Physician who attends the Crevels at their final illness.

**Agathe Piquetard**, the housemaid whom Baron Hulot marries after his wife's death.

**Counselor Lebas**. Lawyer at one time engaged to Hortense Hulot

## SYNOPSIS

Published and written in 1846. It is a novel concerning an aggrieved woman who takes vengeance on her extended family. To appreciate the entanglements of this story is to immerse yourself in the complexities of vengeance. A perfumer, and a fairly high government official, wants to take revenge on the family of Baron Hulot, who stole the high class operatic girlfriend of the former perfumer, Celestin Crevel. With this avenging purpose in mind, Crevel visits the wife of the girlfriend stealer. We quickly understand, though, how twisted is the motive of Crevel; he wants to seduce Adeline as vengeance against her husband, Baron Hulot. However Adeline bluntly rejects Baron Crevel's proposal, whereupon Crevel turns his

attentions to Bette, the cousin of Adeline, who is jealous of Adeline for having made a fine marriage, and for being beautiful, which Betty is not.

Meanwhile Bette makes two new acquaintances, a Polish sculptor, Steinbock, whom she saves from suicide, and a sexy girl whose husband works in the War Dept. Bette does her best to nurse back Steinbock to health; not surprisingly he falls for her. Bette is in the meantime sharing her lodging with the Marneffe couple, Valerie and her husband who works for the War Department. The women grow close, and by and by do some dangerous plotting between them. What Valerie wants is jewels and staves, what Bette wants is to trick both the Baron and Steinbock into infidelities which will wreck their lives. In the end, in this case, Bette succeeds in her vengeful effort to destroy lives and families. The victims of her vengeance are wiped out.

## SCENES

**Balzac spreads a wide lens.** He takes us on a leisurely milord ride with M. Crevel, through the streets of Central Paris, into the upscale suburbs where Valentine lives. We are invited to absorb the gentleman's sense of well-being and dignity. But to suspect that there is more to it than that. As we are soon to learn, however, we are not yet able to penetrate the true feelings of this seemingly self-composed 'highly placed government employee.'

**M. Crevel is plotting.** Although Crevel seems the figure of confidence, as he rides in his milord, he is in fact consumed with themes of jealousy and vengeance, central issues of the novel. He enters Valentine's house, and sits down with the lady, Valentine. The reader takes what follows as polite talk. The sharp edges are still hidden. But they will soon emerge.

**The truth comes through.** First there is polite talk until we realize that the two conversants have much in common. Crevel's daughter is married to the son of Valentine. The parents have family matters to discuss. This fact is only one element in the Baron's reasons for visiting, although he appears to put it foremost. He has come on a seething mission of vengeance, which is not yet clear to Valentine.

**Quiet class warfare.** The visiting Crevel, ex perfumer carries a terrible resentment against Baron Hulot, the wife of Valentine Hulot. The Baron Hulot stole a prized soubrette girlfriend from the visiting perfumer. Bitter enmity followed. This enmity has followed the visitor into Valentine's sitting room.

**Crevel, Adeline's visitor** surprises Valentine gradually, as she comes to realize that he is, in the most inappropriate way, trying to put the make on her. The irony is even richer, for Adeline doesn't yet know why Crevel is taking such liberties with her. Crevel's plan is to make out with Valentine, as a way of fouling up her marriage to Baron Hulot. The weaponization of sexual interrelations is almost standard offensive practice in the social actions of this novel.

**Adeline rejects Crevel's proposition.** His brief interest now falls on Adeline's cousin, Bette, but he soon knows he must turn his vengeful attention elsewhere. Bette is looking for a man, and is deeply resentful of her family's neglect of her. She is at this point in no mood to be involved in others' sexual games.

**Bette comes into contact with Steinbock,** a Polish sculptor, whom she saves from committing suicide. As they live in adjoining apartments she is able to nurse him back to life, and they fall in love. Bette expands her desires and confidence. This is a high moment in her life.

**Bette's apartment** is in a modest building where she meets the Marneffe couple. The gent works for the War Department. Bette befriends Mme. Marneffe, Valerie, who is very beautiful and ready to scheme. The two women plot together and their friendship grows. They seem destined to pool their common desires.

**Bette and Valerie plot.** Valerie has a criminal mind, and a taste for the flashy. She wants to get her hands on precious jewels, or whatever else she can get her hands on in the homes of the rich. Bette has a unique drive. She wants to bring woe on her extended family. She wants to use Valerie the seducer to bring ruin and financial disaster on Steinbock, who has been unfaithful to her, and on the Baron Hulot. Financial ruin will be the path to destruction.

**The plot develops.** Baron Hulot visits Bette, where he meets and falls in love with Valerie. The Baron creates a luxurious new home for the Marneffes. Money begins to flow away from the Baron, as once again his financial woes rise. His dangerous habit of overborrowing sets in. What can he do to placate Valerie?

**Blow to Bette.** Bette is crushed when she learns that the sculptor Steinbock, who has left her, is about to marry Hortense, the lovely daughter of Baron Hulot. Bette's revenge is to strike out at Baron Hulot through Valerie, who is deputed to seduce away as much as remains of his wealth.

**Consequences for Hulot.** The trap Cousin Bette has laid for Baron Hulot—who now must keep continually paying to support Valerie's husband's ascension in the War Department-- begins to decimate the Baron's wealth, and to force him into fraudulent activities. This is the first result of Cousin Bette's vengeance.

**Bette's plot grows.** Wielding the seemingly magic power given her by Valerie, Bette proceeds to entrap Crevel and Steinbock inside Valerie's path to financial ruin. The baron eventually finds himself lost on the path of fraud. Steinbock's infidelity shocks the charming Hortense, who leaves him to return home.

**In the end** Bette's set of machinations prevails, with the devastating assistance of Valerie, and without the knowledge or understanding of the decimated Hulot family. The ugly Betty has taken her revenge. Her victims are barely aware of her existence.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### Cousin Bette.

**Overview** Balzac's *Comedie Humaine*, in which *Cousin Bette* is a major player, features specimens from all kinds of human beings, and thus plays into its author's passion to classify. It seems especially appropriate to view the present novel thus, because of its references to 'ugly Betty' as ape like, 'a monkey in petticoats.' The era in France (first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) abounded in anthropological investigations and explorations, during which the French occupied a leading position as collectors and museum builders. Cousin Bette, who is first seen sitting apart in her aunt's garden, is from the outset presented as something of an 'exhibit.'

The novel, as Balzac understood it, was a new genre of literature, in which learning and knowledge were put on display, understanding of the human situation increased, and of course those pleasures that can be provided by 'holding the mirror up to nature' put on full display. In this, we may say, the 'realist' tradition Balzac worked in diverged from the more 'imagination centered' creativity emphasized by the contemporary—but profoundly different—creative work of, say, the Lake poets in England. The poetic and the narrative diverge at the point where these two cultures meet.

**Character** The keynote figure in Balzac's *Cousin Bette* is Bette herself, although as in most Balzac novels there is a wide variety of characters, some of whom also appear in other novels of Balzac. Bette herself is the cousin of Adeline Hulot, wife of Baron Hulot, a successful and woman chasing aristocrat, who represents much that Bette scorns. Bette particularly deplores the charming Hortense, daughter of the Hulots, who has essentially stolen Bette's intended. None of this sits well with Bette, who is of peasant stock, clumsy and heavy. (Bette has had male attention in the past, but from young men whiffing money, and she has never gotten within shooting distance of love.) Bette's problem is to some degree beyond her control, for she is naturally ill favored—too big, awkward, bad complexion—and is of a visibly sour mien, prepared to see the worst in others. She is not naturally attractive, though in mid-life-- she is forty two at the time of the present fiction—she happens on what clearly she hopes will be the love of her life. Steinbock, a young Polish sculptor, lives near Bette in a small apartment. He is, unfortunately, unsuccessful in his work, and on the verge of committing suicide. In the end he is to recover, and leave Bette behind.

**Parallels** The vengeful Old Maid makes her way through world literature and folklore, and crops up in cultural backgrounds in which women are stigmatized for remaining unmarried. The question may be asked, of such cultures, whether the stigma precedes the individual case, or the reverse. In either case

the expectation of gentleness, in the female, generates keen exasperation when the expected feminine is replaced by a figure in the guise of a crone. The croneish guise may be blended with the magical—as in the case of Circe, who transforms Odysseus' men into swine—or into the guise of the melodramatic revenge taker, like Medea—or into the form of a malign hag living deep in the woods, like Baba Yaga of Slavic or East European folklore. Cousin Bette does not belong to folklore, but to imagination, and yet the inventive mind of Balzac enabled him to find, within her, springs of contrariety—say her putative Lesbianism—which enlighten our understanding of daily societal life.

#### Illustrative moments

**Withdrawn** When first we see Bette, sitting in Adeline's garden with other family members, we know that she is apart, by her withdrawn manner. She is clumsy, not playful, and pays little attention to the arrival of Mr. Crevel. Balzac artfully applies language to suggest a degree of pictorial sadness—could it be what we would label depression?—while at the same time including the fleeting image of Bette among her age mates. Balzac establishes these characterizing scenes in very few words, and those often with the simplest of descriptive settings. He does not directly confront a character, accumulating descriptive terms—facial peculiarities, complexion, posture—but rather leaves the impression of withdrawnness by the little the character is given to say, by the reaction of another character to the person in question.

**Complex** Bette has in the past rejected several proposals of marriage from acceptable middle class suitors. This is significant, indicating, as it does, that although her motivations largely revolve around resentment and vengeance, for the slights she has received, she has remained choosy when it comes to the marriage game. The upshot of this detective work, into Bette's thinking, is the further query into just what Bette's 'resentment' actually was. Was she victimized by the world she was brought up into? Or was she rather the victim of her own delusions? From her later behavior, in which she chose a girlfriend to join her in active revenge taking on men, it appears evident that Betty was capable of making her own decisions.

**Enchanted** Bette grew increasingly exasperated by the success of the Hulot family, both in their marital aspirations—Hortense has stolen Bette's fiancé—and financially—Baron Hulot has become a prominent and wealthy man of state, while Bette is barely scraping along through her daily existence. Then an unexpected event happens. One day as Bette is returning to her small apartment, she comes across a Polish sculptor, Wenceslas Steinbok, who lives in a cramped apartment on the floor above hers. The poor man has been unsuccessful in his work, and is on the verge of committing suicide. Bette takes pity on him, and gradually helps nurse him back to health. In the process the two fall in love. But the story does not end there, for Bette once more happens onto a way to bring doom down onto herself.

**Revengeful** Bette's solo move out of despair, into goodness for another—instead of self-pity and anger.—occurs in another apartment building, where she is living alone. In that dwelling she meets a young couple, and grows friendly with them, especially with the young wife of a war department clerk. The two women make a plan to advance their mutual interests. These mutual interests, unfortunately, are fundamentally criminal. Valerie, the very beautiful new friend, wants to make out with men whom she can rob of their valuables. Bette, however remains true to her longing for vengeance, and sees how to arrange the seduction of both Steinbeck and Baron Hulot, neither of whom can resist a good screw. Both Steinbeck and the Hulot family are lured by Valerie into financial ruin.

#### Discussion questions

Is Bette both vengeful and self-destructive? To the extent that she is vengeful, what is the source of her anger?

What was the status of Lesbianism in the Europe of mid-nineteenth century Europe? Are Bette and Valerie lovers?

Why did Bette refuse several marriage proposals? Why did the case of Steinbeck catch her attention and move her feelings?

## THEMES

**Jealousy and vengeance,** These two vices clearly preoccupy Balzac, as he writes and struggles over the issue of what seems to him 'contemporary culture.' The roots of these vices, as Balzac sees them, are social, but simply because human beings in society are inherently hostile to one another, and eager to defend themselves against the foreign other. Vengeance kicks the stakes a bit higher than mere jealousy for it reflects a desire to do equal harm to the one who has provoked your jealousy. Vengeance wants action, as does Betty's desire to harm her extended family, for their de facto marginalization of her, and for her own ugliness, of which she had simply been born a victim. The same desire for vengeance is what drives M. Crevel, to approach Adeline, on a sunny morning at her house, with a desire to seduce her as revenge for her husband's theft of Crevel's girlfriend.

**Love** Valentine, the intended target of Crevel's seduction vengeance plan, remains above the brouhaha of vengeance and jealousy which pervade this novel. From the outset of the book, when she is assessing Crevel's cynical mind, she remains true to her own husband, Baron Hulot, despite the fact that he is as flagrantly scornful of her as is baron Crevel. A country person by background, like Bette, she is as fierce in her own values as is her cousin in hers.

**Passion** Adeline is passionate for virtue, although many of the men who surround her are simply eager to build their erotic lives at her expense. The two men who surround her as husband and cynic would be lover, are both erotics to the extreme, consumed with hunger for the feminine tribe. In that diffuse sense of passion, it is as though Balzac bathes his texts in the free flow of sexual overpour. (That desire, it may be added, naturally overflows the inherited male-female boundaries. Both Bette and Valerie were clear candidates for lesbianism, and free boundary sexuality of all sorts its way out of the opera dance halls, where many a count found or lost his sultry love.)

**Evil and vice** Both Crevel and Baron Hulot are driven by physical passion, even lust—for their desires have no limits, and are allowed to trample across family values and plans, even to destroy health and finances. Bette is living vengeance, while her husband is living infidelity. It is no novelty to see such headlong giving to evil and vice in high literature.

Western classics abound in which the pleasure associated with vice are given fond attention. (Not a few of those classics belong to the French tradition. Balzac was an avid reader, as we know, and missed none of the fine erotic action fields of Racine, Laclos, Mme. de Lafayette, his contemporary Gustave Flaubert—*Madame Bovary*, 1856—or Francois Mauriac, in whose *Nest of Vipers* (1932), the intricacies of erotic passion were subjected to fascinating and often fatal scrutiny.

**Homoeroticism** It is implied that Betty is queer. Though it is not made explicit. She is of a rough make, a rather awkward country girl stature, and clearly of a mean disposition. Were we simply to read her this way, she might seem to fit perfectly to the erotic image of her friend Valerie, who is dangerously feminine. The fact is that Balzac presses beyond a routine suggestion of the homoerotic. For instance Cousin Betty's name 'Betty,' incorporates the French word 'bete,' which means 'beast.' She is sometimes compared to a 'monkey dressed as a woman,' or to be 'jealous as a tiger.'

'Her face resembled that of a pythoness; she clenched her teeth to keep them from crackling, 'She had pushed her clenched fingers under her cap, to clutch her hair and support her head, which felt too heavy. She was on fire. The smoke of the flame that scorched her seemed to emanate from her wrinkles as by the crevasses rent by a volcanic eruption.' Critics of the present text have considered Bette the most fearful of Balzac's creatures, and a parallel to Iago, incarnate evil in Shakespeare's *Othello*. By this last comparison Bette transcends herself into myth material, an up reach that fits oddly with the concept of Balzacian 'realism.'

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Has Balzac any morally encouraging point to leave with us in *Cousin Bette*? Is it not true that he firmly supports virtue, and that Adeline, as a shining example, puts many to shame? Yes, but does

Adeline change the course of events by her stance for virtue? Or does she simply give evil a foil to play against? If so, what attitude has Balzac, toward moral and social evil?

One answer may be that Balzac, like Shakespeare, wants to display a canvas of the world, with its flaws and nobilities all interwoven. 'All is true,' 'to hold as a mirror up to nature,' 'All the world's a stage/ and all the men and women merely players...they have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts...'

It may be that Balzac simply wants to offer us a rich tapestry of the unpardonable social milieu of his moment. The problem here is—remember this is a discussion—that Balzac, like Shakespeare, seems to exult in the milieu and characters he depicts. Think of the empathetic manner in which he depicts the milord carriage ride, taken in the first frame of the present book. We feel the pride that this fairly prominent government official radiates as he benignly salutes the admiring passersby. Then think of what, a few 'pages' later, we learn about what has to the mindset of the same baron Crevel, as he fulfills this benign seeming journey into the posh suburbs. Those pages incorporated, we know that the perfumer has been seething all along, at the inexpugnable wound that he has recently received. (The lecherous husband of baroness Adeline, whom Crevel is en route to visit, has stolen the demimondaine girlfriend of Crevel, who is inwardly spitting with rage, and whose purpose, in making the present visit, is to proposition Adeline, make out with her, and further screw up the marriage of Adeline and her husband.)

What light does this mini episode shed on the intentions of Balzac as a moralist?

2

There seem to be sharply different senses of realism, as it permeates nineteenth century fiction.

There is the attention to the precise events, structures, and mindsets of daily life; detailed descriptions of wallpapers, rugs, window frames, with a readiness to depict styles of dress, manners of behavior, or social cultural events. One might say that Balzac and Gustave Flaubert bring different versions of that realism to a degree of perfection.

There is another kind of realism, that of Edmund and Jules de Goncourt, which derives from the newer dispositions toward sociology, in the second half of the century. By this literary perspective interest falls especially on the social interconnectedness of characters in fiction. We might call this realism a sociology of literature.

Is there a natural cycle of literary genres—realism. Idealism, lyricism, mysticism—which follow one another and generate new forms from within themselves?

Who do you see in twentieth century fiction that relates it to the nineteenth century literary issue?

3

Does it make sense to expect moral perspectives in the novel? Or is the novel frankly a form of entertainment with no proper aspirations to make others or oneself wiser or happier? The significance of a novel like the present seems to hinge on an answer to the present procedural question.

Balzac does not, on the whole, seem to care much about the moral betterment of his readers or himself. Take a sample of his finer fictions—*La Peau de Chagrin*, *Le Pere Goriot*, *Eugenie Grandet*, *Cousin Bette*—and ask what personal moral texture you have found in yourself during the reading of that text, or what new view of the moral world you have acquired. (There is of course no reason why there must be a major moral element to what we consider significant literature. There is perhaps only the murmur of suspicion that moral and aesthetic values incline to interhouse one another-- a premise to be proven, not just asserted.) The text inspection the present writer self recommends is inclined to discover that the cured text is, by virtue of being just that, cleansed of the unconscionable.

Do you accept that account of the special morality of the aesthetic?

4

What does Balzac see, as the root of the viciousness which pervades society? Balzac is a Catholic, and has doctrinal reason to view mankind as tainted by an original fall. Is that the path of his thinking? Does he introduce a religious perspective into his text?

Or would you rather say that Balzac hones in on simple concupiscence, the lust for money and the goods money brings with it? Valerie is obsessed by fine jewels. But does she buy happiness with them, or does she only buy an image of her own transcendent beauty? Does she want to destroy families, as Bette does? Is Bette able to incorporate any of Valerie's beauty, or is beauty unpurchasable? Is simple human hostility enough to generate a world of startling or damaging others?

Here is the maze. Does Balzac walk through it as a moralist?