

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Honore de Balzac's Characters

# RAFAEL (La Peau de Chagrin)

### Overview

In an early scrapbook Balzac made reference to a 'skin which fathoms the mystery of life,' and he attributes it to a 'conte oriental,' an Oriental tale. A week later he published a story about a young man who loses his 'last Napoleon,' a serious financial blow, and who immediately leaves a casino, and throws himself into the Seine to drown. Balzac broods over this nub of a tale before him. By July 1839 a slowly evolving text would be released, encouraged by the periodical publishing process, which dictated that parts of a text would be released periodically. An audience appetite would be aroused, to find out how an achieved state of textual affairs could be resolved. All of which gives some impression of the incremental fashion by which Balzac put together his first complete novel, *La Peau*, and well illustrates the stage by stage printing process that was becoming formative for the nineteenth century novel.

### Character

The key character, Rafael, emerges at an angle to the plot, and gathers in Balzac's earlier plot intimations. The character emergence is like this. A young man 'loses his last bottom dollar at the casino,' where first we meet him, in stark despair. Emerging from the casino, where he has lost all, Rafael is swept up by a crowd of merrymakers on their way to feast and drink at the Palais Royal, and in his distraught condition he puts up little resistance to the flow of the crowd. After a night of Debauche—an experience highly familiar to Balzac himself—Rafael joins the world again, only to happen on a unique Curiosity Shop, run by a proprietor who appears to have gathered a broad assortment of the world's bizarre treasures. Among the remarkable items is a *peau de chagrin*, a wild ass' skin, which brings with it imaginary and occult powers, and the advice that its lucky possessor receives, including a sharp precaution. From that point on the character of Rafael will be closely tied up with the *peau de chagrin*. As a possessor of the *peau* it will be Rafael's destiny, his character, to wax and wane with the powers and debilities of the *peau*. What he longs for he will get, but at a price—loss of happiness or health—which he cannot buy back. Rafael is what he becomes in possession of the magical *peau*.

### Parallels.

Goethe's Faust is an elder scholar who calls on the powers above, mostly diabolical, to restore his youth and vigor. And in doing so makes a diabolical pact, for which he will in the end pay heavily. From this kind of pact with the devil, as a trade in for some years of youthful vigor, for physical power and joie de vivre, Dr. Faustus gives up his hopes and claims on heaven.

The theme of *Faust* diffuses into a world-wide precautionary perception, of the inherent wisdom of self-limitation. In ancient Athens the word tag was *meden agan* (*nothing in excess*), in Rome it was *ne quid nimis*; in its Latin form the notion, and view point, became touchstones of literary (or pictorial) classicism, in the eighteenth century. The wisdom incorporated in this wisdom expression is the wisdom Dr. Faustus, for all his learning, failed to incorporate.

### *Illustrative moments*

*Despondent.* When first we see Rafael he is entering a casino, welcomed by the hat check man, and moving over to the gambling tables. We can tell, by the way the others are eyeing him, that the young man, Rafael, is at the end of his rope. He approaches the croupier, makes his bet, and watches without emotion as he comes out empty handed. The reader of the text feels that the young man has reached a dead end, and wonders what can come next. The ominous moment is darkened further when we follow Rafael outside to the banks of the swirling river Seine. The young man peruses the waters, thinking.

*Captivated.* Having to all appearance rejected the notion of suicide, Rafael continues walking along the river bank until he comes to a highly original Curiosity Shop, into which he is warmly invited by the ingratiating shop owner. Entering, feeling the hands of fate at his steps, Rafael follows the proprietor through rooms heavy with rare botanical or mineral specimens, precious jewels and cloths from the Orient, wall designs and tapestries and, finally, lovingly fingered and proffered, a wild ass' skin. Under pressure, Rafael accepts this new possession.

*Bewildered.* Rafael has been warned, by the proprietor of the Curiosity Shop, that he should use the ass' akin with care. He must not misuse the powers of the skin, and remember that if he demands too much wish fulfillment from the skin he may pay for it. Though if he asks for nothing he will get nothing. In the midlife moment, in which Rafael finds himself, he has gained considerable wealth but his health is inexorably declining. He is literally torn between desire and decline, and reaches a crisis from which he cannot see how to break loose, is afraid to have desires, but non-existent without those desires.

*Destroyed.* Once again in a familiar setting he vows to abstain from all desire. (He has been horrified at the withered look of his face). At a friend's advice he decides to take the waters at Aix-a kind of break he needs. He enters his spa apartment when he hears a knock on the door. It is his old childhood flame, Pauline, who is deeply shocked by his exhausted appearance. After he briefly recounts his story, he realizes that he is talking himself into a powerful desire for her. Grasping his dilemma, Pauline tries to bolt the door that separates them. Rafael smashes through the door, seizes her in a love embrace, and dies.

#### *Discussion Questions*

1 Is *La Peau de Chagrin* a moral tale? If so, what moral point is it making?

2 What is Rafael's fatal weakness? Did he have the power to control desire? How did he try to do this and why did it not work?