

Honore de Balzac's Characters

Eugenie Grandet

Overview

Balzac plunges here into the texture of lived history, placing us from the start in a France still deeply moved by, first, the turbulence of the Revolution, and subsequently the competing claims of a restored Bourbon monarchy, followed by the July monarchy of Louis Philippe (1830-48), under which Balzac wrote most of his *Comedie Humaine*. We open the present text inside a substantial country mansion whose stone foundations date from the late Middle Age. The owner of this cold but grand property is a prominent cooper and vineyard owner, who dominates the small village of Saumur, which lies close to the city of Tour, where Balzac grew up.

There M. Grandet and his small family—his wife, daughter Eugenie, and maid—live a quiet and disciplined life of making money—both husband and wife are rich to start with—processing the suitors for Eugenie's hand, and enjoying—with Felix' two best friends-- an occasional game of cards.

Character

Eugenie Grandet is the central figure in the book entitled after her name. Her father dominates her—to a point-- and her mother allies with her, while she herself acquires little room for personality development. Like many young ladies in nineteenth century fiction (and society) she passes her ripest years awaiting the right husband; for her, as for many such ladies, the wait is arduous and life consuming. (Consult the novels *Middlemarch*, *Jane Eyre*, or *Pride and Prejudice* for diverse readings on the unmarried young woman in Victorian culture.) The despair at becoming an old maid did not disfigure Eugenie's personality, but when a good chance for a relationship arrived, the arrival of nephew Charles with news of the bankruptcy of Felix's brother, Eugenie was thrilled and attentive. For much of the remainder of the narrative, as it turns out, Eugenie will be waiting for the right paramour, which in fact never takes place, and especially for Charles until it turns out, at the end of the tale, that she is once again alone and unmarried in the home mansion.

Parallels

Nineteenth century Victorian fiction abounds in examples of intelligent or culturally isolated young women who find neither work nor a man at the proper time of life. Jane Austen takes us deeply into the mindset of young ladies who fall for suitors who barely compete with the ladies' own families for pleasance and civility. Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley* studies two young women who become close friends and fall in love with two brothers. The identity issues confronting the women multiply with the personal conflicts of the two couples. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* anatomizes a bourgeois family as they sort out their girls' complex marital negotiations. In all these instances what might have been dynastic negotiations two centuries earlier have, as in *Eugenie Grandet*, become matters of domestic middle class strategy.

Illustrative Moments

Mistaken During the brief interlude in which Felix' nephew Charles visits the Grandet family, Charles has left open and lying around various papers which seem to imply that he has split up with a current girlfriend and is painfully alone. It is indicative of Eugenie's mindset that she instantly translates these notes into her own possible future, and jumps to unwarranted conclusions. She is in fact mistaken about Charles' mindset, and will in the future miss him to no avail after he has forgotten her in the Indies.

Isolated Eugenie is a victim of isolation—no contact with people of her age, no loving warmth except from her mother, and from potential suitors no true interest except in her money. Even her father begins to see her as a financial competitor, for the inheritance that will be freed upon the death of her unwell mother. When father Felix learns of Eugenie's crush on Charles, the departed, he is enraged, and

devises a punishment for his daughter. He locks her in her room, and keeps her there on a diet of bread and water—except for Sundays, when she is released to go to church. She remains stoical as we have to expect, but in fact becomes the locus of an increasingly interiorized struggle between her mother and her father. Eugenie and her mother are allied in their mutual understanding that Mother, who received a large inheritance, is anticipated to leave the bulk of her inheritance to her daughter. Felix is, to his frustration, a vulnerable player in the contest.

Abandoned. Charles finally returns from the Indies, after many years of forgetting about Eugenie. (She pines for him, has not forgotten him for a moment). He has been with many women, and has in fact grown cynical about love, which seems to him bourgeois rubbish. He has completed his desire of marrying unto the nobility, but it has brought him only woes. All of this he conveys to Eugenie, who is crushed beyond words. At the end of her emotional endurance she pays a visit to her priest, who reminds her of what is after all her sacred duty, to marry and procreate. It would be too selfish of her to remain trapped inside herself, when she has so much to offer others. The question of the novel, of course, is whether Eugenie, by this point, has that much to offer others. We must realize that the cynicism with which Charles comes in on her, at the end, is a cruel gratuitous blow.

Crushed. Eugenie takes to heart the priest's admonitions, and, returning to her Saumur home, accepts the marriage proposal of young Cruchot, the son of the notary who was one of Felix's two good friends. However she attaches a severe stipulation to the codicil of her marriage vows. There is to be no consummation of the marriage; thus no conformation to the advising priest's wishes. This darkening note leaves a pall over the end of the text. Upon Cruchot's death Eugenie returns to the mansion and resumes her seemingly endless routine of waiting for the right man.

Discussion Questions

Are we right to say that Eugenie is the 'main character' of *Eugenie Grandet*. Or is the 'main character' something larger, like the 'inexorable advance of capitalism over the more archaic agricultural social systems of late Mediaeval Europe?'

What do you understand as Eugenie's reason for stipulating that her marriage should remain unconsummated? Why is this so important to her?

Is this novel a tragedy? Did destined conditions dictate the fate of Eugenie, or was there something she could have done, to introduce more joy and significance into her life?