

Honore de Balzac's Characters

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 understand 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.