

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Honore de Balzac's Characters

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 19th 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 Steinbock 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 vengrful, 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 Steinbock catch her attention and move her feelings?