



## ***Pere Goriot***

### **Exposing the Genius of Balzac**

Honore de Balzac is artful, detailed and opinionated when it comes to describing place. He gives us a great sense of a Paris neighborhood where the story unfolds. Floors, walls, and decorations are described in such a way that they evoke a sensation of revulsion in the reader.

Characters in the story are aptly described. Details are provided that penetrate the surface, exposing the true soul and nature of the personalities in this dramatic tale.

Pere Goriot has what I see missing in a number of modern pieces of literature, and that is a vivid description of the appearance of the characters from the tie they wear to the hat to the clothing to their manner of walking, giving color and beauty to the tale. Details are not spared even regarding rather minor characters like Mademoiselle Michonneau, “the elderly spinster” or Monsieur Poiret, who is described as an “automaton” (page 14).

The Madame’s personality is compared to that of her establishment and the two are described as being one and the same. She has “the glassy eyes, the innocent air of a procuress about to raise hell for a higher price” (page 11) She sees the fact that she had suffered in life as justification for being indifferent to the suffering of others. Though she laments her tenants’ departure at the end, she admits, “my house, stripped of its men! They were like furniture to me” (page 217).

“To put it briefly,” Balzac writes of Madam Vauquer’s establishment, “unpoetic poverty reigns here: pinched, concentrated, threadbare poverty” (Page 10). There, boarders who are almost like a family gather around a scanty meal served on a filthy tablecloth. Poverty has hardened their hearts, and they feel little sorrow for poor Goriot as his tale and his sacrifices for his two spoiled daughters become known to them gradually.

Balzac points to the tragic nature of the tale in the very first chapter, almost in the same manner that movies today are identified by the labels they bear according to their style and genre. He also points early on to the mendacity of happiness in Parisian society and the genuineness of suffering there. He insists in the beginning that elements of this novel are true, preparing the reader for the complexity of the narrative.

There is a consistency to the mood of the story that is not broken by jarring images of the character being completely out of place or the description of the house and its surroundings capitulating to the whim of the writer. There is pervasive poverty throughout the book. We see two sides of Paris, the empty pockets and empty souls of the rich and the empty pockets and the empty souls of the poor. There are exceptions, however. Goriot is full of giving, full of understanding. Eugene also has a heart and is quite touched by the old father’s plight.

Critical of the social circumstances of post-revolutionary France, Balzac calls Paris “a cesspool,” frequently using the word “mud” to describe the physical and moral decadence of Parisian society. Those whose appearance is ugly and shabby like Goriot represent moral and noble concepts, and those who are beautiful and well-dressed like his daughters signify superficiality and greed.

There are realistic twists to the plot. Young Eugene de Rastignac, newly introduced to Parisian society, ends up witnessing its cruelty and frivolity, yet succumbs to it at the end and joins the empty-pocketed but fashionable partygoers. He seeks money from his impoverished family in hopes of winning a wealthy woman's heart and Vautrin, a villain who had disguised himself among the guests with an eye on that money, seeks closer acquaintance with Eugene.

Balzac clarifies the fact that although men and women are staying in the establishment of Madame Vauquer, the place is a respectable institution and no intrigue of sexual nature is to be expected among the occupants. Thus, he prevents any false illusions that could cloud the minds of the readers, leading them to unreasonable conclusions or blur their vision as they read through the novel.

Victorine Taillefer is introduced early in the story as a Cinderella-like character that is expected to bloom into a gorgeous princess eventually. But to my dismay and maybe to Balzac's credit, the story does not center on Victorine. Instead Eugene takes center stage. This poor student has fallen in love with one of Paris's most-admired women. When Bianchon happily expresses (page 198) to Eugene the fact that Victorine Taillefer is now a rich girl, he declares angrily that he has no intention of marrying her, saying, "I'm in love with an enchanting woman" namely Delphine (page 199).

Balzac repeatedly uses metaphors that remind the reader of biblical concepts. Of Pere Goriot he writes, "There was more than human grief on his face. To paint as it should be painted the face of this Christ among fathers, we would need to search among the images created by the princes of the palette to depict the agony suffered on the world's behalf by the Savior of mankind...Eugene, overwhelmed by the man's

inexhaustible devotion, looked at him with the simple wonderment that, in the young, constitutes faith” (215).

Balzac delves deep into the mind of Pere Goriot while showing the reader the trauma to which Rastignac is exposed to. The true moment of epiphany for the reader comes at the end when Eugene who is expected to despise Parisian society ends up embracing it for the fleeting pleasures it invokes or maybe to seek the love of his life.

It took me a second reading of the book to find what I had missed the first time. What Balzac has in mind is not Christianity per se, he writes in page 224, “Love is a religion, and its rituals cost more than those of other religions. It goes by quickly and, like a street urchin, it likes to mark its passage by a trail of devastation. Real feeling is a luxury to be indulged only in a garret; without such wealth what would become of love in such a place?”

Eugene is in love, an apostle of Goriot. He seeks at the end to go to Delphine, probably to play the same role in her life as her father did. After all, he has pledged to make himself “worthy” of the little heaven that is offered to him in the apartment Goriot and Delphine have prepared for him (page 216).