

**Honoré de Balzac**  
***Le Père Goriot***

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6th June 2003

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## Exam Questions

Discuss the following passage, especially with relation to the characterisation of Father Goriot, as well as its context within the novel.

Bianchon se transporta d'autant plus volontiers qu'il allait être près du vieux pensionnaire.

— Qu'a-t-il ? demanda Rastignac.

— A moins que je ne me trompe, il est flambé ! Il a dû se passer quelque chose d'extraordinaire en lui, il me semble être sous le poids d'une apoplexie sérieuse imminente. Quoique le bas de la figure soit assez calme, les traits supérieurs du visage se tirent vers le front malgré lui, vois ! Puis les yeux sont dans l'état particulier qui dénote l'invasion du sérum dans le cerveau. Ne dirait-on pas qu'ils sont pleins d'une poussière fine ? Demain matin j'en saurais davantage.

— Y aurait-il quelque remède ?

— Aucun. Peut-être pourra-t-on retarder sa mort si l'on trouve les moyens de déterminer une réaction vers les extrémités, vers les jambes ; mais si demain soir les symptômes ne cessent pas, le pauvre bonhomme est perdu. Sais-tu par quel événement la maladie a été causée ? Il a dû recevoir un coup violent sous lequel son moral aura succombé.

— Oui, dit Rastignac en se rappelant que les deux filles avaient battu sans relâche sur le cœur de leur père.

— Au moins, se disait Eugène, Delphine aime son père, elle !

**Part I.**  
**Lecture 1**

# 1. Background to Balzac

Honoré de Balzac was born on 20 May 1799 [Rogers, 6]. His father was a highly intelligent man, a kind of philosopher in the French style and a social reformer, who had raised himself up from a peasant background to the liberal middle class. It was in this milieu that Balzac grew up.

Balzac grew up at a time when the people were nostalgic for the Napoleonic period before the Revolution which had just passed, and uninspired by the return of the Bourbon monarchs, (Louis XVIII, Charles X) and the July Monarchy (Louis Philippe, the “bourgeois king”).

Balzac set up a publisher’s in 1825, which was to be a spectacular failure, and was wound up in 1828. Because of this and other adventures he was to spend his entire life in debt [Rogers, 14]. He managed a magazine, *Chronique de Paris*, and founded another, *La Revue parisienne*, both failures.

Balzac professed to support the Catholic faith but not in an orthodox fashion. He subscribed to the theories of Emanuel Swedenborg which were popular at the time. This mystic with a scientific background “created a hierarchy of heavens and hells intimately ‘corresponding’ to the material world in a unified system” [Rogers, 16]. According to Rogers, Swedenborg’s writings “were to help determine the moral structure of *La Comédie humaine*” [Rogers, 16].

Despite his background, Balzac was a strong supporter of the working and peasant classes.

Balzac started studying law, but dropped his studies for a year to be a writer, and came up with *Cromwell* (c. 1819), a tragedy. He then continued, writing novels, chiefly for money, and under a pseudonym. His influences were, among others, Sir Walter Scott, as well as Lawrence Sterne’s great novel *Tristram Shandy*. He wrote in a variety of genres: horror, historical, fantasy, realism.

Balzac had a difficult relationship with his mother, who preferred his younger brother Henry. He seems to have been isolated at boarding-school, and even as an adult his mother, while probably rescuing him from financial disaster, never stopped treating him in her letters as a little boy. This seems to have coloured his relationships with women, one of his first lovers being considerably older than him (Madame de Berny, 45 when Balzac was 22).

His later relationships, if passionate, were also distant (Madame de Castries, who refused to become his lover after an eight-month platonic friendship; Madame Hanska, married to a much older man and living in the Ukraine, meeting for trysts abroad and only marrying months before Balzac died [Rogers, 32–34]).

But Balzac despite these privations was in the main supremely self-confident, and not averse to proclaiming the superiority of his work while he was writing it. His money problems weighed on him, however, and it is no surprise that money receives detailed treatment in *Le Père Goriot*.

## 2. *La Comédie humaine*

*Le Père Goriot*, written in the early 1830s (1834), is one novel out of around 90 novels and short stories that make up Balzac's monumental work known collectively as *La Comédie humaine*. The lives of the thousands of characters (around 2500) which inhabit the work are intertwined and interconnected, and take on a greater or lesser importance from one work to another. *La Comédie humaine* was intended to fill in the gap left in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by describing human, temporal, earthly existence with equal grandeur to Dante's description of heavenly and hellish realms.

*La Comédie humaine* was begun in 1831, although it was not called by that name until 1842 [Rogers, 26]. He seems to have worked prodigiously for the whole period, going to bed early and working through the night and early morning, as well as the day. The works principally concern Paris, and present it in its changeless aspect, almost as a contrast to the human upheavals which have taken place there. As Samuel Rogers puts it:

The streets, the houses do not depend on the observer; they possess a life of their own, an essential nature which is little affected by the play of sunlight or shadow, by the cycle of the changing year. The relationship between them and the people whom they surround is not transitory, but enduring—a relationship . . . of solid objects rather than light-bathed surfaces. These objects do change, just as the people change . . . but this change is not the accident of the moment: it is the inevitable continuous change of things in themselves that is the core of history. [Rogers, 49]

This apparently subtle distinction—the living city which is always there, unchanging but alive—demonstrates that Balzac was concerned with making a universal statement. Although he was fascinated by the detail of Paris society, and paints as accurate a picture as possible of the dealings of the various layers of that society, Balzac sees the forces that drive the action of the society as being universal forces. They are always there: money, love, influence, all as unchanging as the cobblestones of the city. It is the big picture which interests him.



## 3. The Plot

### 3.1. Structure of the novel

*Le Père Goriot* [P.G.] is divided into four parts. Part I is called “Une Pension bourgeoise” and introduces us to the characters, and their relationships, and details the revelation of Goriot’s situation to the other characters. Part II, “L’Entrée dans le monde”, deals specifically with Rastignac’s attempts to improve his situation. Part III is called “Trompe-la-mort”, and focuses on Vautrin’s part in the intrigue. Part IV is entitled “La Mort du père”, in which the conflict with his daughters and sons-in-law comes to a head, and we learn about Père Goriot’s final days.

Christopher Prendergast has written that the introduction to the novel is replete with elements which suggest the establishment of a mystery. He uses this argument to support his analysis of Balzac’s use of melodrama in his novels—mystery is assumed to be one of the characteristic modes of melodrama.

Central [in the novel’s opening] . . . is the figure of the enigma . . . at almost every point, diction and rhetoric combine to saturate the reader’s consciousness with a sense of mystery. The text speaks of its ‘désir de pénétrer les mystères d’une situation épouvantable . . .’ . . . and of its intention to explore ‘les secrètes infortunes du père Goriot’ . . . (31, 22)[Prendergast, 71]

This air of mystery primarily concerns the affairs of Père Goriot (Old Goriot), but is emphasized, as we shall see later, by the characterization of Vautrin also. The mystery established in the introduction affords the possibility for the drip-by-drip revelation of dramatic information at the precise moments, of course, when they cause the most amazement in the reader.

### 3.2. The Boarding-House

The pension known as the Maison Vauquer is owned by Mme. Vauquer, who resides on the first floor. The cook, Sylvie, lives in an attic room. On the first floor also is Victorine Taillefer, who lives with Mme. Couture, a relation, who looks after her as a mother. They pay 1800 francs a year. The second floor contains an old man, Poiret, and the middle-aged Vautrin (a.k.a. Jacques

Collin, or Trompe-la-Mort, escaped convict in *La Comédie humaine*). These two lodgers pay 72 francs a month (864 francs a year). Mlle. Michonneau, an elderly spinster, lives on the third floor, alongside Père Goriot and Eugène de Rastignac. The third-floor occupants pay 45 francs a month (540 francs a year). As well as Sylvie another attic room is occupied by Christophe, a jack-of-all-trades. As well as the boarders there are those who pay 30 francs a month to dine at the pension.

(? garçon  
de peine)  
“man of all  
work”

### 3.3. “Une Pension bourgeoise”

Our introduction to Eugène de Rastignac simulateously foreshadows the intrigue of the novel, and demonstrates his key role in its events.

Sans ses observations curieuses et l'adresse avec laquelle il sut se produire dans les salons de Paris, ce récit n'eût pas été coloré des tons vrais qu'il devra sans doute à son esprit sagace et à son désir de pénétrer les mystères d'une situation épouvantable, aussi soigneusement cachée par ceux qui l'avaient créée que par celui qui la subissait. [P.G., 31]

But for his observant curiosity, and the skill with which he managed to introduce himself into the salons of Paris, this story would not have been colored by the tones of truth which it certainly owes to him, for they are entirely due to his penetrating sagacity and desire to fathom the mysteries of an appalling condition of things, which was concealed as carefully by the victim as by those who had brought it to pass. [*Father Goriot*]

In this sentence we are introduced not only to Rastignac's character but also, indirectly, we have the foreshadowing of the future actions of Père Goriot and his daughters.

The introduction of the novel focuses on the poverty of the lodgers at Mme Vauquer's, beginning with the raw financial data which brings them together in that part of Paris (72 francs a month for a second-floor room), and continuing through a minute description of the visible signs of their poverty (the surroundings, the worn-out clothes and shoes they wear) and finally to the toll their poverty has taken on their bodies: “des faces froides, dures, effacées comme celles des écus démonétisés” [P.G., 32] “their cold, hard faces were worn like coins that have been withdrawn from circulation” [*Father Goriot*]. In defining his characters according to their poverty Balzac is explicit in his intent with regard to the overall *Comédie humaine*.

Ces pensionnaires faisaient pressentir des drames accomplis ou en action ; non pas de ces drames joués à la lueur des rampes, entre des

toiles peintes mais des drames vivants et muets, des drames glacés qui remuaient chaudement le cœur, des drames continus. [P.G., 32]

Dramas brought to a close or still in progress are foreshadowed by the sight of such actors as these, not the dramas that are played before the footlights and against a background of painted canvas, but dumb dramas of life, frost-bound dramas that sere hearts like fire, dramas that do not end with the actors' lives. [*Father Goriot*]

We hear a brief summary of Victorine Taillefer's story: her father has refused to acknowledge her. Brought up devout by Mme Couture, every year she attempts to see her father and offer his mother's forgiveness, but is not admitted to the house. Her brother also disdains her.

The most interesting character we are introduced to in the first chapter is undoubtedly Vautrin. He is presented in such a worldly, knowing and impressive light that we have the sense that he is above all the others in the house, that he is a breed apart. He is symbolically offered the passkey to the house so that he may return after midnight, and he charges himself with repairing any of the locks which stick in the house. Paris for him, in contrast to all the other characters, seems to be an open book. This characterization makes possible the sweeping, penetrating analyses of the social scene of Paris which he later offers to Rastignac, and informs us of the subversive thinking which is necessary to penetrate to the corrupt heart of the capital.

We are introduced to Père Goriot by way of the tale of his arrival at the house, that is to say, when times were still good. We witness the unpacking of his collected wealth, and his installation on the first floor, with even the suggestion of Mme Vauquer's entertaining designs on the old man.

Les yeux de la veuve s'allumèrent quand elle l'aida complaisamment à déballer et ranger les louches, les cuillers à ragoût, les couverts, les huiliers . . . Ces cadeaux lui rappelait la solennités de sa vie domestique. [P.G., 42]

The widow's eyes gleamed as she obligingly helped him to unpack the soup ladles, table- spoons, forks, cruet-stands, tureens, dishes, and breakfast services- all of silver, which were duly arranged upon shelves, besides a few more or less handsome pieces of plate, all weighing no inconsiderable number of ounces . . . he could not bring himself to part with these gifts that reminded him of past domestic festivals. [*Father Goriot*]

Throughout the action of the novel, therefore, we have the gradual revelation of the story of his decline from this happy state, to his present position on the third floor and eventually out the door.

**Part II.**

**Lecture 2**

### 3.4. The Characters

Balzac paints his characters larger than life. In the same way that he dwells on the misery of the Paris suburb where the action takes place, Balzac expounds first upon the physical characteristics of the main characters, and then upon the extreme aspects of their character. With his characters which recur throughout *La Comédie humaine*, “Balzac feels free to introduce the unexpected” [Pugh, 79]. The following introduction of the main characters will touch on their appearance in other works, although their characterization is perfectly coherent to the reader who has only read *Le Père Goriot*.

**Eugène de Rastignac** (Called *de Massiac* early on in the MS.) Rastignac appears in *La Peau de chagrin* (1831), which is set five years later (although it was written previous to *Le Père Goriot* (1834), which makes the latter a prequel that predates *Star Wars: Episode One* by a considerable stretch), in which he is a man of the world [Pugh, 79]. Balzac appears to have decided that Massiac was to become Rastignac some time during his writing of *Le Père Goriot*, and gone back changing the name and dates to fit. In this work, he is a law student. Ambitious, determined, sincere, proud. His family (the Baron de Rastignac, two sisters, Laure and Agathe, and two brothers, Henri and Gabriel) has great ideas for him, and supports him financially despite their slender means (he receives 1200 francs a year out of the 3000 which the estate makes (57)). In this respect Rastignac’s correspondence with his sister Laure illuminates Balzac’s conception of him.

**Vautrin** “Rebel and master-criminal” [Pugh, 80]. Worldly, generous, wily, knowing, charming, mysterious. A major character in *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes* (1938). Referred to also as Jacques Collin and Trompela-Mort by Mlle Michonneau when the policeman arrests him. Has Victorine’s brother killed in a duel by a friend of his, Franchessini.

**Père Goriot** (Jean-Joachim) Faithful, proud, honest. “Not only honourable . . . but capable of intense feeling” [Rogers, 53] as Samuel Rogers says. He is described in the novel as a “Christ de la Paternité” (282), and indeed his whole character seems to revolve around his dedication to his two daughters, which is so selfless that he is suspected by the household of supporting them because of some sexual obligations. The opening of the novel describes his slow decline to the chapest part of the house, and the accompanying contempt of the household with regard to the rumours of his “libertine” past. His first appearance in the action of the novel is using a rope to crush his silverware to sell it for his daughter’s sake. This places him as a sort of alchemist, a magician working behind the scenes to maintain his daughters’ lifestyle [Brunel, 34–35].

**Victorine Taillefer** Daughter of a rich banker, who has disowned her. First appears in *L'Auberge rouge* (1931). Pious, sad, forgiving. We see her trying to get her father to accept a letter from her mother. She represents a kind of foil to the sophisticated, worldly women who catch Rastignac's eye, but Vautrin's sordid machinations with respect to her inheritance unfortunately tarnish her as a possible way for Rastignac to make his fortune.

**Mme Couture** A widow of a senior civil servant, looks after Victorine since her mother, a relative, died in her house. She has taken it upon herself to ensure that the girl is brought up properly, maintains a religious outlook to get her through the pain of her father's treatment of her.

**Mme Vauquer** The landlady of the boarding-house. Has designs on Goriot when he first moves in, and goes to some lengths to set up a match with him. Her attempts to have another valued boarder, Mme de l'Ambermesnil, a countess, test the waters with him, but her own attempts at seduction are rebuffed and she declares him a waste of energy "vous ne tirerez rien de cet homme-là" (46), and leaves town without paying her rent. Mme Vauquer is described as "suspicious as a cat", mean to those close to her but prepared to help strangers to flatter her ego (47). Part of Goriot's decline can be attributed to her gossip following her disappointment with regard to him.

**Poiret** "L'idemiste", repeats everything others say. "Une espèce de mécanique", mechanical, a bore, weak character.

**Mlle Michonneau** Grotesque, weak character. These last two are indicative of the capacity of the main characters' passions to destroy them. We wonder what has brought them to this state of mediocrity, and imagine that they had the same great hopes as Rastignac. (They actually turn up married in later novels.)

**Sylvie** The "grosse" maid. Skims the top off the milk for herself and Christophe every morning before serving the remainder to the boarders. Her witnessing of Goriot's daughters coming and going (a few months after the countess leaves) give rise to the accusation that he is a "libertine". Her witlessness in not recognizing either daughter on their return visits allows her to imagine that four women, not two, are paying visits to Goriot.

**Christophe** Deals with such jobs as shining the lodgers' shoes and locking up at night, serving the meals etc. Honest, hard-working, but much maligned and seems to be forever delivering things or sleeping.

**Horace Bianchon** (*externe*, main character of *Comédie humaine*, represents voice of Balzac himself.) A medical student, with an interest in phrenology, which he would like to try out on Goriot. He has modest, sensible

ambitions, (to follow in his father's footsteps in the country) in contrast most of the other characters in the novel. He gives Rastignac, his friend, some sound advice when he needs it, despite his usual clowning.

**Anastasie de Restaud** (Comtesse) Elder daughter of Father Goriot ("la brune" seen by Sylvie visiting Goriot). She appears in an earlier novel, *Gobseck*, as *Emilie* de Restaud. She is married to a count (and therefore a countess) and in that novel she pawns the family diamonds with the eponymous Gobseck. When her husband retrieves them, she has to confess to the illegitimacy of all their children barring the eldest, Ernest. Her lover is named in *Le Père Goriot* as Maxime de Trailles. Her moment of triumph in the novel is to appear at a ball wearing her jewels [Pugh, 74]. She is noticed by Rastignac at Mme de Beauséant's ball at the opening of the action, and invites him to her house (61). Subsequently, however, she closes her doors to him because he mentions her father.

**Delphine de Nucingen** Younger daughter of Goriot "la blonde" seen by Sylvie visiting Goriot). She is married to a banker from Alsace. She is more faithful to her father than Anastasie, but still neglects him during his illness for the excitement of attending Mme Beauséant's ball [Rogers, 52]. As Samuel Rogers notes: "social ambition makes these women cruel" [Rogers, 52]. They have both risen from the position of being vermicelli-merchant's daughters, and are determined never to let the opportunity for social advancement pass them by.

**Claire de Beauséant** (Vicomtesse) Relative of Rastignac, introduced to him through a letter from his aunt Mme de Marcillac (58). They become friends and she invites him to a ball. Friend of the Duchesses de Langeais. Loses her lover Ajudo-Pinto when he gets married, and is the last to hear of the wedding. Decides then to give one last ball before leaving society forever (the ball to which Anastasie wears the diamonds) [Pugh, 75]. Mme de Beauséant reappears in the novella *La Femme abandonnée* (1832) about to "enter middle-age frighteningly alone" [Pugh, 84] because of a similar incident involving another lover (Gaston de Nueil, a distant relative).

**Antoinette de Langeais** (Duchesse) Friend of Mme de Beauséant, at first unsympathetic, (announces the planned wedding unceremoniously to Mme de Beauséant) then more understanding as she has her own crisis (Montriveau ignores her). These two finally enlighten Rastignac as to the life story of Goriot and his relationship with his daughters.

**Part III.**

**Lecture 3**



### 3.5. Action of “Une pension bourgeois”

#### 3.5.1. Breakfast, Goriot’s intrigues

The story proper begins with Rastignac’s late return from Mme de Beauséant’s ball, where he has met Anastasie. He hears a noise in Goriot’s room and sees him manipulating his silverware in his room, then Vautrin letting himself in even later.

We see the morning preparations for breakfast, and Vautrin tells of seeing Goriot selling his silver at the goldsmiths (l’orfèvre) (69), and then going to Gobseck’s the money-lender’s, apparently to pay off a debt of Anastasie’s. Christophe takes the receipted bill to her, after Vautrin sees who it is addressed to.

Victorine and Mme Couture set off on the yearly visit to her father, and Vautrin hints that he is about to sort the matter out.

At breakfast Rastignac begins to tell of his time at the ball, and of having seen Anastasie in the neighbourhood. Vautrin puts two and two together and wisely announces the name of the lady and the address. Goriot realizes that he was too late, and his interest in her appearance at the ball has the guests gossiping more than ever. Vautrin launches into a tirade on the foolishness of men like Goriot, who neglect their families to fritter away their fortunes on a favourite sweetheart who despises them. He offers his theory to Rastignac about Anastasie’s “protested bills” (something like a present-day bounced cheque) which Gobseck appears to be holding over her head, and which Goriot seems to have at least partially settled with the money from his silver.

At this point in the narrative Rastignac has one of his first realizations about the nature of Paris life, when he exclaims to Vautrin: “votre Paris est donc un boubier” (77) [boubier=mire]. Vautrin elaborates:

— Et un drole de boubier, reprit Vautrin. . . . [read from text] (77)

Although Vautrin’s surmising concerning Goriot turns out to be incorrect with respect to his motives, Balzac’s depiction of Paris as a mire is to be reinforced by the events which happen subsequently, especially with respect to the manner of Goriot’s daughters’ treatment of the old man.

Rastignac resolves to uncover the mystery, demonstrating his naivety and his ignorance of the social laws of Paris. He fails to understand, at this point, that his own actions in uncovering the secrets will create further dramas outside of his control. He is still the provincial spirit, carefree and oblivious to his effect on society.

#### 3.5.2. Victorine’s drama, dinner

Mme Couture tells Mme Vauquer and Goriot the story of her visit with Victorine to her father’s house, where the letter from her mother was thrown on the fire,

and Victorine's brother ignored her. Over dinner the guest play a mindless linguistic game, tacking "-orama" to the end of every word. Bianchon tells Vautrin about his terror of Mlle Michonneau, "cette vieille fille blanche me fait l'effet de ces longs vers qui finissent par ronger une poutre [gnaw through a beam]" (81). The other boarders make fun of Goriot, who doesn't follow the game, and Vautrin goes from the merely mocking to physical abuse, by thumping his hat down on his head. We notice Goriot's concern for Victorine, still in distress from her visit—her state is linked to Goriot's concern with Balzac's description: "la douleur de l'enfant méconnu qui aime son père [not recognized]" (84). Rastignac shows his insight as well as his sincerity at this early stage in the remark to Bianchon:

— Mon cher, [read from text] . . . je ne plaisante pas." (84)

### 3.5.3. Rastignac goes to the de Restauds

The next day Rastignac does go and investigate the mystery by calling on Anastasie. Along the way we hear again about the hierarchy brought about by the lamentable state of Paris' streets, as Rastignac reflects that if he was rich and could ride in a cab, he wouldn't have to have his shoes shined before calling on anyone. This is reinforced by the attitude of the servants to his arrival on foot, and redoubled by his ignorance of the house, which causes him to go into a side-room where towels were being dried, and having to be shown the way to the *salon* [drawing-room]. These details serve to place Rastignac low enough down on the social ladder that we understand his desire to succeed, and sympathize with his crusade.

He happens to see hear Goriot, then to see him kissing goodbye to Anastasie. We also meet Maxime, and Anastasie obviously wants to be alone with her lover, but Rastignac stubbornly refuses to take the hint. Racine's disadvantage in this milieu is once more underlined by the contrasting descriptions of their clothes and hair (Maxime's is blonde and curly, and the cut of his coat makes him look like a young woman). Maxime is described as a "dandy".

The Comte de Restaud comes in, ignores Anastasie and greets Maxime. The arrival of Anastasie's husband forces her to introduce Rastignac, and suddenly the doors of the social world are opened to him (these particular ones will be closed again a few minutes later). It is Rastignac's slender ties to nobility which make all the difference in the world described by Balzac:

Monsieur, dit-elle en continuant et en présentant Eugène au comte de Restaud, est monsieur de Rastignac, parent de madame la vicomtesse de Beauséant par les Marcillac, et que j'ai eu le plaisir de rencontrer à son dernier bal. (91)

The effect is described as that of a "coup de baguette [wave of a magic wand]". The attitude of the two men changes at once, and the count discusses Rastignac's

family connections with him, finding that an ancestor of each was a navy commander. On his way out Anastasie confides in Maxime that she plans to use Rastignac to divert attention from her affair with Maxime (paratonnerre—lightning-rod (94)). This is not to be, however, as things do not go so well between them after that, when he mentions having seen Goriot, whom he calls “Père Goriot”. This is another “coup de baguette” (95), which has the effect of reducing his status to less than zero. Naturally, the cause is a mystery to Rastignac, but he might have at least guessed, but for his ingenuousness, that the mention of the name of the man who is apparently acquitting Anastasie of her debts with a pawnbroker might have caused some embarrassment.

What he can't know, of course, is the embarrassment of the couple in having personally reduced Anastasie's father to a financial state where he apparently no longer deserves even the common title “Monsieur”. Anastasie, for her part, is probably fearing the consequences of her husband's knowledge that her father has visited her on the sly, and will suspect that she has got herself into desperate financial straits again (remember she has already pawned her diamonds and Restaud has had to repurchase them in *Gobseck*).

Finally Rastignac notices that he has overstayed his welcome, and takes his leave. We see the blatant hypocrisy of Parisian high society in the contrast between Anastasie's assurance that he will be welcome to return and Restaud's instructions to the butler that he is not to be admitted. He decides to visit his cousin and find out the answer to the mystery from her.

**Part IV.**

**Lecture 4**

### 3.5.4. At the Hôtel Beauséant

Taking a cab to the Beauséants house does nothing to lessen his consciousness of his inferior stature in that society. His cab has recently been used for a wedding party, and pulls up outside the house next to an extremely grand brougham furnished with very energetic horses (coupé (98)), so that the valets outside laugh at the contrast. It is the coach belonging to the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto, with whom Mme de Beauséant has been carrying on a three-year liaison. We learn that Ajuda-Pinto is there to try and work himself up to telling Claire de Beauséant that he is to marry Mlle de Rochefide, but he cannot bring himself to do it. He is glad when Rastignac arrives, and tries to get out of spending the evening at the theatre with Mme de Beauséant. His lie is uncovered when she hears his directions to the coachman to go to the Rochfide's house, and she composes a stern letter to be delivered to him there. She is so distressed by her suspicions about the marriage that she forgets about Rastignac. When finally she talks to him, he makes clear to her the depth of his confusion.

Balzac describes Rastignac's disappointments and humiliations of the day as comprising an invaluable education for him, of far greater importance than his legal studies. Importantly, he is now so conscious of his ignorance that he knows the extent to which he requires the help of an expert in the world of Paris, and so he is wise enough to admit this and ask for it frankly:

— Eh! oui, je suis un ignorant . . . [read from text] (106)

It is the word "la vie" which contains the heart of the problem which faces Rastignac. For his ignorance of the social subtleties of Paris constitutes no less than an ignorance of *life itself* in the world in which he hopes to move. If he is to find himself a well-financed woman to help him further his ambitions he will need Mme de Beauséant's influence, and almost as important, her instruction on how to behave. This instruction begins immediately with her telling him not to show his feelings so readily when the butler interrupts his conversation.

The Duchesse de Langeais comes in, and the two women set about teasing each other cruelly about the men in their lives who are not paying them as much attention as they should. Thus Mme de Beauséant hears confirmation of the fact that Ajuda-Pinto has indeed gone to see Mlle Berthe de Rochefide, and we hear that the Duchesse de Langeais' sweetheart, Général Montriveau, has abandoned her. She will not let the matter of Ajuda-Pinto rest, and insists that Mme de Beauséant acknowledge the coming marriage. Rastignac serves as a distraction for her to change the subject, to the consternation of the Duchesse de Langeais, who regards Rastignac harshly.

Rastignac tells the two women the story of his faux-pas at the Restauds house. It doesn't take long for them to fill him in on the paternity of the two sisters, and the Duchesse de Langeais tells all she knows of the sorry tale of Goriot (she seems to remember every detail but his name), from his treatment

at the hands of his sons-in-law to his success at selling flour during the Revolution when it was scarce and he had a ready supply, being a section (Paris quarter) president at the time. During this time, according to her, his new sons-in-law found it convenient to have him around, but when the Revolution was over they had no more use for him, and his daughters continued to see him in private when their husbands were away.

When the Duchesse de Langeais leaves, Mme de Beauséant reflects bitterly on the mockery she managed to work into her entire conversation with them. Her emotion of the moment ties in well with Rastignac's desire for success faced with this impenetrable milieu. She adds to the impression of the "mire" of Paris created by Vautrin with her summary of the faithlessness of friends:

Aussitôt qu'un malheur nous arrive, il se rencontre toujours un ami prêt à venir nous le dire, et à nous fouiller le cœur avec un poignard en nous en faisant admirer la manche [handle]. Déjà le sarcasme, déjà les railleries! Ah! je me défendrai. (115)

Rastignac's need for help comes at a time when it serves to facilitate the vicarious revenge of Mme de Beauséant on the society which has treated her so cruelly. In an extremely authorial outburst, she tells him:

Eh bien! monsieur de Rastignac, traitez ce monde comme il mérite de l'être. Vous voulez parvenir, je vous aiderai. [read from text] (115)

Her idea is to have Rastignac invite Delphine de Nucingen to her place. Delphine, being married to a mere baron, does not enjoy the same status as her sister Anastasie, who has become a countess by her marriage to Restaud, and is jealous of her. As well, Delphine's current lover (de Marsay) no longer cares for her. She will therefore jump at the chance to be introduced into high society. Rastignac can use his future friendship with Delphine to lever his way up the social ladder. With a more sophisticated imagery than the fickle "coup de baton" from earlier, Mme de Beauséant offers her name as an Ariadne's thread<sup>1</sup> (117) for Rastignac to find his way through the labyrinth of Paris.

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<sup>1</sup>Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos of Crete. Minos had Daedalus build a Labyrinth, a house of winding passages, to house the bull-man, the Minotaur, the beast that his wife Pasiphae bore after having intercourse with a bull. (Minos had refused to sacrifice a bull to Poseidon, as the king promised, so the god took revenge by causing his wife to desire the bull—but that's another story.) Minos required tribute from Athens in the form of young men and women to be sacrificed to the Minotaur.

Theseus, an Athenian, volunteered to accompany one of these groups of victims to deliver his country from the tribute to Minos. Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and gave him a thread which he let unwind through the Labyrinth so that he was able to kill the Minotaur and find his way back out again. [[http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/info\\_labyrinth/ariadne.html](http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/info_labyrinth/ariadne.html)]

### 3.5.5. Uproar at the Vauquer table

Rastignac returns home in another cab, taking the time to reflect on the lessons of the day. He finally finds Vautrin's arguments (77) convincing, and now equates fortune with virtue (118). His determination to succeed is spurred on Mme de Beauséant's promise of support, and given extra piquancy by the sudden contrast of the dark, smelly pension with the luxuries of the Hôtel Beauséant.

After some provoking from Vautrin, Rastignac blurts out all that has happened that day, and vows to defend Goriot from further harrassment. He is so vehement that he all but challenges Vautrin to a duel. He composes letters to his mother and sisters begging for money to buy gloves so that he can go about in society. The character is summed up in his wish as he mails these letters: "Je réussirai!", echoing the assurances of Mme de Beauséant "Vous voulez parvenir? Je vous aiderai" (115). Desire for success is the defining characteristic of Rastignac, and he fulfils this role in perfect dedication to the "type" of the young parvenu.

He later tells Goriot about his daughter Anastasie and her lover Maxime. He neglects his studies, going to class only to answer the roll-call, and calling frequently on Mme de Beauséant, who has managed to get the wedding of Ajuda-Pinto postponed. Gradually he finds out the entire details of Goriot's life. It is the narrator who gives us the impartial résumé (125–29). We hear that he was a thrifty worker who became something of a genius in the business of importing flour and corn products, and took on the presidency of his section to secure his business during the Revolution. The scarcity of grain made his fortune. But his intelligence only extended to his particular business. Balzac explains Goriot's present character in the novel for his readers by his practical nature which, for this author, almost always conceals "un sentiment sublime au cœur", (127) and the circumstances of his marriage. This "feeling" was the dedicated love of his wife, and the desire to protect his daughters. The fact of his wife's death after seven years of marriage led to this last feeling being concentrated, and his daughters received all his energy from that time on. Goriot's constant stereotyping by the other characters of the novel into the role of "father" is explained in the phrase: "le sentiment de la paternité se développa chez Goriot jusqu'à la déraison" (127).

We see some glimpse of friendship between Goriot and his father-in-law in this account, seemingly the only person in the novel with close ties to Goriot, symbolizing the extreme attachment he had had with his wife, and we hear about the emotion he feels for her memory in the violence with which he defended himself to slurs based on his failure to accept any new wife. We hear that he was known for his devotion to his daughters, and one competitor who had used it to advantage was ruined (telling him Delphine had been run over). He had always spent almost all he made on the girls, and they each had half his estate as dowry when they married. They and their husbands exhorted

him to give up his trade, and he was forced to take up his room at the Pension Vauquer on the sale of his business when he realized they would not let him move in with either of them.

### **3.6. Action of “L’Entrée dans le monde”**

#### **3.6.1. Vautrin’s plan**

Rastignac receives the replies from his mother and sisters to his requests for money, which include promises for the sum of 1550 francs. In her letter his sister Laure offers to sew new shirts for him. A postman arrives with the promised money, and Rastignac, not having any change for a tip, is forced to let Vautrin pay the man. This irks him, since the two have only tolerated one another since Rastignac’s outburst in defense of Goriot.

Rastignac pays his debts to Mme Vauquer, getting from her change so that he might immediately pay the small sum he owes Vautrin. The latter takes offense at the notion that Rastignac might not want to be in debt to him for anything.

— On dirait que vous avez peur de me devoir quelque chose ? s’écria Vautrin en plongeant un regard divinateur dans l’âme du jeune homme . . . [P.G., 143]

There follows an argument and Vautrin’s determination to try out his pistols under the lime trees. The guests fear a duel, but Vautrin explains to Rastignac why he in fact likes him. It is his desire for success which has marked him out for Vautrin. And now he knows a way he can use Rastignac’s desire to succeed for Vautrin’s own pecuniary ends. For he has information which is useful to Rastignac in his desire for worldly success.

First Vautrin intrigues Rastignac by taking on the mantle of protector, and hinting at the secrets of his own past, which he draws on to make his assessment of Rastignac’s present situation. He shows him the scar from a duel when he was Rastignac’s age.



**Part V.**

**Lecture 5**

In some ways Vautrin's cynical description of Rastignac's chances in Paris supports the idea of the unchanging nature of the city. Vautrin's wisdom consists in realising that, no matter how energetic, idealistic and talented Rastignac is, he is constrained by the same mathematical facts as everyone else: thousands just like him seek the same easy positions in life.

Le baron de Rastignac veut-il être avocat ? Oh ! joli. Il faut pâtir [suffer] pendant dix ans, dépenser mille francs par mois, avoir une bibliothèque, un cabinet [chambers], aller dans le monde, baiser la robe d'un avoué [solicitor] pour avoir des causes [briefs], balayer le palais [de Justice] avec sa langue.<sup>2</sup> [P.G., 150]

In this initial description, he is equally scathing about the prospect of marriage as a means of extricating Rastignac from his lowly position:

Voulez-vous vous marier ? ce sera vous mettre une pierre au cou ; puis, si vous vous mariez pour de l'argent, que deviennent nos sentiments d'honneur, de noblesse ?<sup>3</sup> [P.G., 150]

Vautrin's portrait of the young Rastignac is uncannily accurate and, but for the cynical tone, authorial. He echoes the characteristics that mark him out from the other characters, especially his own emphasis on the word "*parvenir!*" (151), showing his perceptiveness as equal to Mme de Beauséant's, with her "Vous voulez parvenir, je vous aiderai" (115). He shows the other side of the coin of Rastignac's desire for success, the side which caused his sense of remorse on receiving the letters. "Parvenir à tout prix" (151) specifies Vautrin, and it is this "à tout prix" which Rastignac doesn't want to think about.

This is all by way of softening Rastignac up, because Vautrin has a piece of information which Rastignac has overlooked in his myopic vision of Paris high society. He is also aided by the breadth of vision and imagination allowed to those with no scruples whatsoever. Although many in the boarding-house know that Victorine Taillefer is the daughter of a wealthy banker who seeks to leave his entire inheritance to his son, and who refuses to recognize her, Vautrin also knows that she has taken a fancy to Rastignac, for she has just poignantly revealed her anxiety at the prospect of a duel between the two men: "Oh! monsieur, dit Victorine en joignant les mains, pourquoi voulez-vous tuer monsieur Eugène?" (144). He is also sufficiently forward-thinking to see that the death of Victorine's brother would cause her father to take her back and

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<sup>2</sup>The Baron de Rastignac thinks of becoming an advocate, does he? There's a nice prospect for you! Ten years of drudgery straight away. You are obliged to live at the rate of a thousand francs a month; you must have a library of law books, live in chambers, go into society, go down on your knees to ask a solicitor for briefs, lick the dust off the floor of the Palais de Justice. [*Father Goriot*]

<sup>3</sup>Have you a mind to marry? You hang a stone around your neck; for if you marry for money, what becomes of our exalted notions of honor and so forth? [*Father Goriot*]

provide a generous dowry: “Si la volonté de Dieu était de lui retirer son fils, Taillefer reprendrait sa fille” (157). And he knows a man unscrupulous and reliable enough to provoke the brother into a duel (Colonel Franchessini, 241).

But the murder of the brother is not the measure of his cynicism. Vautrin’s idea is for Rastignac to marry Victorine, who comes with a dowry of a million francs, then admit debts of 200,000 francs, which she will willingly pay to ensure her sweetheart’s happiness. Vautrin would then take them as twenty percent commission to achieve his dream: purchasing enough slaves to make him a wealthy farmer in the United States.

After informing Rastignac of his plan, which is greeted with incredulity, Vautrin details to him the moral vacuum in which he will soon find himself, which will inevitably cause Rastignac to do much worse things. This is the real introduction to “L’Entrée dans le monde”, a portrait of the underbelly of the society that Rastignac is about to enter in the next few pages. He compares the intrigues of high society with low crimes such as burglary, and comments: “Entre ce que je vous propose et ce que vous ferez un jour, il n’y a que le sang de moins” (160). This discourse gives Rastignac much food for thought, and he decides to reject his former aspirations and make his way by hard work alone: but the plans already set in motion carry him along despite himself.

The tailor that Rastignac has ordered arrives, and he is finally outfitted with the finery he needs to make an impression in the world. Goriot informs him of the next ball (the Maréchal and Duchesse de Carigliano’s) which his daughter Delphine de Nucingen will attend, so that he can report on the movements of his daughters to him.

Rastignac takes his first walk in his new clothes, and knows that he is making an impression. But when he goes to Mme de Beauséant’s, she turns him away, but agrees to have him over for dinner. During the sumptuous meal, which dazzles Rastignac, causing him to reconsider his earlier principled decision to embrace honest poverty, Mme de Beauséant asks if they are going to the theatre, but it seems that the infidelities of the Vicount prevent it, and he suggests Rastignac take her. Thus he is thrust unwittingly into the full glory of Paris society once again, and will encounter the other Goriot daughter, Delphine.

### **3.6.2. The Theatre**

Rastignac goes to the Théâtre des Italiens with the Vicomtesse de Beauséant, his cousin. There he has himself introduced by Ajuda-Pinto to the younger of Goriot’s daughters, Delphine de Nucingen, with whom he is already falling in love. He talks of love with her for an hour, and tells her of being refused at the house of his sister, because of mentioning Goriot in front of her. Mme de Nucingen obviously has a lot of affection for her father (which Rastignac later relates to Goriot), and admits to being upset at not being able to receive him. She is greatly flattered by the frank amorous attentions of Rastignac. However

she is all the while thinking of her lover de Marsay, who has abandoned her and is sitting in another box at the theatre with a princess (Princesse Galathionne).

He has arranged to be invited to the Carigliano's ball through Mme de Beauséant, and he arranges to call on his new love Mme de Nucingen before going. On the way home Rastignac comes up with a nice metaphor to sum up his situation and the methods for handling it:

... dans le jeu compliqué des intérêts de ce monde, il devait s'accrocher à un rouage [cogwheel] pour se trouver en haut de la machine... (177)<sup>4</sup>

This is a perfect illustration of Balzac's attitude to the world he is describing, and Rastignac's place in it. Not being a part of the "machine", he is forced to piggy-back on those who are part of it to rise to the top.

### 3.6.3. Goriot the father

Back at the Maison-Vauquer Rastignac tells all the news of his daughter to Goriot, and he tells Rastignac of their jealousy towards one another. We see the absolute vicariousness of Goriot's existence in the way he speaks of his daughter in this episode [part of seminar extract B]: "Je n'ai point froid si elles ont chaud" (181). The description of him echoes Rastignac's thoughts when he first heard of his dilemma at Mme de Beauséant's house (114): "Le père Goriot était sublime" (182). Rastignac admits that he has fallen in love with her, and he is forced to make up a message from her to please the old man: "elle vous envoyait un bon baiser de fille" (183).

### 3.6.4. Bianchon's advice

Rastignac's thoughts waver between Mme de Nucingen and Victorine, and Vautrin continued to tease him at his continued poverty (having to walk home from the theatre). Rastignac and Bianchon have a philosophical discussion in the Jardin de Luxembourg. They discuss "Rousseau's" (actually Chateaubriand, according to the endnote, 186) moral problem of "killing the mandarin":

... il demande à son lecteur ce qu'il ferait au cas où il pourrait s'enrichir en tuant à la Chine par sa seule volonté un vieux mandarin, sans bouger de Paris. (186)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>... once involved in this intricate social machinery, he must attach himself to a spoke of the wheel that was to turn and raise his fortunes...

<sup>5</sup>... he asks the reader somewhere what he would do if he could make a fortune by killing an old mandarin somewhere in China by mere force of wishing it, and without stirring from Paris?

Bianchon proves his moral superiority in the cast of characters by refusing. When Rastignac reformulates the question to include a beautiful woman in the motivation for the crime, Bianchon provides an enlightening remark: “Mais tu m’ôtes la raison, et tu veux que je raisonne” (187). Although Rastignac is ostensibly speaking of his sisters here, the remark is significant in terms of what Balzac is telling us about the danger in the motivation of female approval for a man trying to make his way in society. A dilemma is opened up for Rastignac in the reader’s mind: he needs a woman to make it to the top of the heap, but love for a woman will destroy his reason, which he needs to stay there. Bianchon’s sensible speech, in which he affirms: “Notre bonheur, mon cher, tiendra toujours entre la plante de nos pieds et notre occiput [back of the head]” (187),<sup>6</sup> provides a piece of perspective in counterpoint to the myriad temptations and aversions offered by the other characters. The modest desires of the medical student are Rastignac’s escape-hatch from the traps he is about to become ensnared in, which he fails to take advantage of.

### 3.6.5. Out with Delphine de Nucingen

Rastignac arrives home to Goriot and an invitation from Mme de Nucingen to dinner and to the opera. He is suspicious of her motives, thinking she wants to make de Marsay jealous. Vautrin has the opportunity to ridicule good-naturedly Rastignac’s elegant get-up before he goes out. He finds Mme de Nucingen alone, and depressed, and manages to seduce her into confiding in him, with the promise that he would “kill six men” (“tuer six hommes”) for her (194). She takes him in a carriage to a gaming-house, and has him bet 100 francs on roulette for her, until he has won 6000. He bets on his age: 21, then on red, and comes away with 7200 francs (200f (10 louis) he gives to a man at the table), and takes 7000 to Delphine.

Delphine de Nucingen confesses to Rastignac the dire financial state of her affairs, how her husband keeps her on a slender allowance, and they sleep in separate rooms, and she is forced to go to the extremes of gambling to have her own money, while her husband spends freely on his mistress. It turns out the money is owed by Delphine to de Marsay, and Rastignac accepts the thousand francs left over (only to give it to Goriot later to keep for her). Again Rastignac hears the echo of his destiny “je réussirai”, in Delphine’s reply to his comment: “je suis un pauvre étudiant que a sa fortune à faire”/“—Elle se fera, dit-elle en riant” (202).

After all this conniving the couple attract a lot of attention at the opera, and Rastignac is therefore disappointed not to receive a kiss at the Pont-Neuf on the way home. He accuses Delphine of hypocrisy, correctly, since she gave him so many on the receipt of the gambling money (at the Palais Royal). We

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<sup>6</sup>Happiness, old man, depends on what lies between the sole of your foot and the crown of your head

recall that although Delphine appeared to be so grateful, she embraced him “vivement, mais sans passion” (197).

**Part VI.**

**Lecture 6**

### 3.6.6. Rastignac's conscience

When Rastignac sees Goriot again he repeats the phrase which defines Rastignac again: "Vous réussirez" (204), and we see him leaning the other way on the see-saw of morality set up by the conversation with Bianchon. the gift of the thousand francs, and Rastignac thinks: "Il y a du plaisir à suivre les inspirations de sa conscience" (204).

This seems to be the last gasp of unsullied virtue before Rastignac is devinively ensconced in the high society of Paris. He is introduced to the Duchesse de Carigliano by Mme de Beauséant, and his friendship with his cousin and the attentions of Delphine de Nucingen combine to make him a great success at the ball (205). When he tells the inmates of the Maison-Vauquer about the event, Vautrin continues to mock his pretensions by pointing out that the Maison-Vauquer is not nearly elegant enough to house "un jeune homme à la mode" (206), by way of attempting once again to seduce Rastignac into going along with his plan.

### 3.6.7. Rastignac's dissipation

There follows a general description of the direction of Rastignac's new life: although he repays his family 1500 francs (207), he gambles (207), he gets into debt, he dines often with Delphine de Nucingen (207), but he soon realizes that he must do something about his inevitable money troubles. At this point the mandarin analogy returns to throw Rastignac's situation into relief. Rastignac tells Bianchon, in response to his light-hearted query, that he has not killed the Chinaman, but "il râle" (he's gasping, moaning). He means to say that the mandarin is in his death-throes, and he means it. His gambling has made his situation desperate, and the moral imperatives which shaped his life up to this point are becoming weaker and weaker. Adding to this situation is the fact that Delphine is stringing Rastignac along, and enjoying the chasteness of their young love after the relative debauchery of her relationship with de Marsay. Rastignac is frustrated by this as he is not yet mature enough to appreciate a woman for her devotion alone.

With his financial troubles constantly weighing on his mind, he makes a subtle amorous speech to Victorine, which Vautrin overhears, to his great delight. Afterwards they again discuss Vautrin's plan, but ostensibly out of a sense of fairness, Vautrin does not want Rastignac to make his decision because of his desperate situation. He therefore offers to lend him 3000 francs for a year, with interest of 500. This is the real point at which Rastignac can be seen to throw away his former scruples, since he previously could not abide owing the man even a small coin. He signs an IOU, and Vautrin promises to leave him his fortune in America if he dies heirless.

Rastignac's resistance is more and more symbolic, as he declares after this meeting: "je n'épouserai certes pas mademoiselle de Taillefer!" (219). He man-



ages to repay Vautrin the next day, after gambling with Maxime de Trailles and Ajuda-Pinto, to whom he owed 2000 francs (100 louis) which he needed to repay with Vautrin's money, but he is still implicated in the approaching crime enough to make him nervous: "je ne suis pas votre complice" (219).

### 3.7. Action of "Trompe-la-Mort"

#### 3.7.1. Poiret and Michonneau

Where Rastignac dominated "L'Entrée dans le monde", this is the part of the novel where Vautrin is the dominant character. Part III begins with the conversation between the innocuous characters Poiret and Mlle Michonneau, and a plainclothes policeman called Gondureau (chef de la police de sûreté, 228). We find out that Vautrin is really Jacques Collin, or Trompe-la-Mort (222), and that the police suspect him of possessing a horde composed of the fortunes of the convicts of three prisons, and he acts as a kind of banker for them (223). The police want to capture him, but first they must be sure he is the right man. Poiret and Mlle Michonneau are to be rewarded for helping to drug him. Mlle Michonneau shows her true colours by skilfully haggling with the policeman over the reward (she agrees to 3000 francs, 227), but not coming to an agreement yet. She reflects over the amount Vautrin might give her for the information, until that evening when a casual unflattering remark from him makes up her mind (poser en Vénus du Père Lachaise, 238).

Through this passage, Poiret does a great imitation of Tompson from the Tintin books, repeating everything the policeman says with a slight variation, and being shocked by the morals of the convicts (223). It's clear overall that Balzac is ridiculing and belittling these two characters, especially Poiret who belongs "dans la grande famille des niais"<sup>7</sup> (221), and have "une sorte de respect involontaire, machinal, instinctif, pour ce grand lama de tout ministère"<sup>8</sup> (221).

#### 3.7.2. At the Maison-Vauquer

Bianchon, who has seen the three chatting before, overhears a few words of the conversation as he walks past them in the Jardin des Plantes. Back at the Maison-Vauquer, Rastignac is seducing Victorine, and has made her fall in love with him with a mere kiss on the neck (231) and sweet words. Vautrin enters at that moment to inform Rastignac that the duel has successfully been provoked, and details the gruesome fashion in which Victorine's brother will be dispatched (231). Rastignac is shocked and resolves in his mind to inform M. Taillefer of the duel.

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<sup>7</sup>"in the great family of fools"

<sup>8</sup>"a kind of involuntary, mechanical, and instinctive reverence for the Grand Lama of every Ministry"

Père Goriot takes him up to his room and informs him that he and Delphine have arranged a love-nest for him and Delphine in the rue d'Artois (232), and that his lawyer has managed to get 36,000 francs a year out of Nucingen for her to live on (233). Goriot will move to the fifth floor above them, and Rastignac will come and tell him about his daughter's happiness. He puts a gift from Rastignac, an expensive and fashionable watch, in a box with Rastignac's coat of arms in gold (233), on the mantelpiece and draws his attention to it. It has a message from Delphine on it: "Je veux que vous pensiez à moi à toute heure, *parce que...*" (235). Rastignac is overwhelmed with happiness, and admits when Goriot talks about Victorine that he just realized that he only loves Delphine.

### 3.7.3. The Drunken Dinner

The dinner at the boarding-house that evening is entirely taken over by Vautrin, with his wit and mirth and invitation to the company to drink. Christophe hands him the first bottle, which he serves to Eugène and Goriot, and tasting a drop himself, declares "il sent le bouchon" (239) and gives the rest of the bottle to Christophe. Consequently, as this is the bottle drugged by Mlle Michonneau, these three are all passed out at the end of the impromptu party. Vautrin demonstrates that he has guessed Rastignac's idea to spoil his plan: "nous voulions aller prévenir le père Taillefer, commettre des fautes d'écolier!" (241). He ends up asleep on Victorine's shoulder, to her great delight. Vautrin comes down, and predicts a bright future for Victorine by reading her palm, along the lines of the plan he has set in motion: "Votre père vous appelle près de lui" (247). After Sylvie helps her take the sleeping Rastignac to his room, Victorine steals a kiss on his forehead. Mme Vauquer and Vautrin go out together to the Théâtre de la Gaïeté to watch a melodrama (242, 247).

Mlle Michonneau and Poiret go to the address the chief of police has given them, and they learn that rather than arresting him they are looking for a way to kill him in the process, to avoid the expense of a trial. He gives them a vial, whose contents Mlle Michonneau puts in Vautrin's coffee cup in the morning.

### 3.7.4. Vautrin's arrest

The next day we are confronted with a succession of coups de théâtre that leaves the reader breathless. The whole house sleeps late except Vautrin, and while a late breakfast is being served Rastignac receives an upset letter from Delphine, who has waited up all night for him. Vautrin tells him the time, and just as he realizes that the duel must be over, one of Taillefer's servants arrives with the news that Victorine's brother is dying from his wounds. Vautrin makes light of it, while sipping on his drugged coffee. Goriot questions Rastignac's fidelity to Delphine, mistaking his shock for realization of his good fortune in Victorine's new riches. Rastignac declares to all: "je n'épouserai jamais

mademoiselle Victorine" (255). Vautrin appears to drop dead from the drug, and Mlle Michonneau and Poiret take him upstairs and identify him as Collin from the letters branded on his shoulder as a convict (?).

Rastignac is sent to fetch Bianchon to care for Vautrin. On the way Bianchon tells him that he has already read news of the duel and Victorine's father's riches, and brings up the supposed romance between them, to Rastignac's consternation. He walks around for a few hours, battling again with his conscience, and goes back to the boarding-house to find Vautrin walking around after being given an emetic by Bianchon. He seems to suspect Rastignac, but Bianchon suspects Mlle Michonneau already. He remembers out loud the name Trompe-la-Mort that he heard her mention in the park, and this name has an immediate effect on Vautrin: "il pâlit et chancela, son regard magnétique tomba comme un rayon de soleil sur mademoiselle Michonneau"<sup>9</sup> (262). At that moment the police surround the house and come in to arrest Vautrin. The chief of police knocks his wig off his head, and the description of his facial features, and especially the manner in which he masters his rage, in the reaction to the blow are testament to the power of his character:

Horrible et majestueux spectacle! sa physionomie présenta un phénomène qui ne peut être comparé qu'à celui de la chaudière [boiler] pleine de cette vapeur fumeuse que soulèverait des montagnes, et que dissout en un clin d'œil une goutte d'eau froide"<sup>10</sup> (263).

He realizes there is no escape so calmly holds out his hands to be cuffed, informing the company of the intent to shoot him. He lets the company see him as he really is, expounding his philosophy, but gracious in taking his leave, except for Mlle Michonneau. His condemnation of her has some effect on the lodgers, who force her out of the house under the threat that they will leave if she doesn't. Poiret ends up going off with her. Victorine and Mme Couture send word that her brother is dead and they will be living with her father, and Goriot turns up in a carriage to take Rastignac to his new flat to have dinner with him and Delphine (275).

### 3.7.5. Rue d'Artois

Rastignac is overwhelmed (276), doesn't feel he can accept, but is finally convinced by Goriot's offer to write an IOU for the expense of the flat. Goriot and Rastignac give their notice to Mme Vauquer, and Rastignac receives the invitation to Mme de Beauséant's ball, which includes Delphine. She is infinitely

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<sup>9</sup>He turned pale, and staggered back. He turned his magnetic glance, like a ray of vivid light, on Mlle. Michonneau

<sup>10</sup>"There was something horrible and majestic in the spectacle of the sudden transformation in his face; he could only be compared to a cauldron full of the steam that can send mountains flying, a terrific force dispelled in a moment by a drop of cold water."

grateful, and makes the (secret, so the maid doesn't hear) transition to "tu" in speaking to Rastignac. Delphine tells Eugène about her sister Anastasie's plans to turn up with the diamonds which gossip tells have been sold to pay her debts. Eugène goes back to his last night at the Maison-Vauquer.

**Part VII.**

**Lecture 7**

## 3.8. Action of “La Mort du père”

### 3.8.1. Delphine’s crisis

Early in this part of the novel we learn that Delphine’s happy arrangement with her husband with regard to her money is more complicated than it seemed. While Rastignac in the room next door overhears the conversation, Delphine goes to Goriot to tell him that Goriot’s lawyer (Derville) has threatened her husband with a court order for the money (296), and that he has admitted his true financial position to her. He has invested all his money in dodgy business schemes abroad, accessible only after a year, and that he is only managing to keep up appearances. Goriot flies into a rage, not believing Nucingen’s story, but Delphine convinces him. There is an early sign of the chink in Delphine’s moral armour, as she partly blames Goriot for her situation:

... il y a peut-être de votre faute, dit Delphine. Nous avons si peu de raison quand nous nous marions! Connaissons-nous le monde, les affaires, les hommes les mœurs? Les pères devraient penser pour nous.<sup>11</sup> (301)

### 3.8.2. Anastasie’s crisis

Anastasie’s untimely arrival brings the family together for the first time in the novel but it is to endure its worst crisis. It appears that the bill of exchange which Goriot has obtained for his silver was one of many Anastasie has got for Maxime de Trailles, who owed 100,000 francs. The secret of Anastasie’s selling of her husband’s diamonds to pay this amount now comes out, along with his discovery of the fact, and the number of her illegitimate children. M. de Restaud has forced Anastasie to swear to sell her belongings to pay him back when he wants (306) (which will be after Mme de Beauséant’s ball, where she proves to the world that he is still in possession of the family jewels). Goriot threatens more and more extravagant punishments, often repeating his threat to kill one or other of the sons-in-law, or to kidnap his Restaud’s son.

However, realising she has already taken almost all he has, Anastasie still asks for more: Maxime is still 12,000 francs in debt. Anastasie is counting on Goriot’s modest investments which she believes he has kept (12,000 francs of perpetual loans, 307), but which he has spent on Rastignac’s new furniture at the Rue d’Artois. Now he only has 1200 francs a year to live on from a life annuity (*rente viagère*, 307). The usage of the 12,000 francs causes a massive explosion of jealousy between the two daughters, provoking accusations and insults which put Goriot under a huge strain as he tries to mediate between the two.

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<sup>11</sup>perhaps you are to blame," said Delphine. "We have so little sense when we marry! What do we know of the world, of business, or men, or life? Our fathers should think for us!

### 3.8.3. Rastignac's intervention

At this point Rastignac, who happens to be holding the bill of exchange which Vautrin had signed off when Rastignac repaid him, alters it to make Goriot the creditor and makes it out for 12,000 francs. He enters and presents it to Anastasie, promising to honour it. She shows her gratitude by accusing her sister of plotting this revelation of her secrets to a stranger, cursing her, storming out, and then feigning regret in order to get her father to endorse the bill to her (313).

When she leaves we see the beginning of the illness which will lead to Goriot's death: he wants to sleep (314), and his actions that evening at dinner are mechanical (315). Bianchot gives us a long diagnosis from his observations at the table, in which we see Balzac's fascination for the capacity of physiognomy to tell a story: "Quoique le bas de la figure soit assez calme, les traits supérieurs du visage se tirent vers le front malgré lui, vois!"<sup>12</sup> (316). We realise at this point that his two daughters have effectively killed their father through their jealousy and their greed, an idea which will recur throughout the rest of this part of the novel.

### 3.8.4. Rastignac and Delphine

At the Italiens with Delphine, Rastignac learns of his cousin Mme de Beauséant's approaching crisis. She is putting on a great ball, and she doesn't yet know that her lover will be married to Mlle de Rochefide by the king the same day. Her ball will turn into a circus for those who want to see how this great society lady handles her definitive abandonment. We see a parallel between the way Goriot makes a mistake in his excessive love for his daughters, and the way Delphine here lets herself be carried away by her affection for Rastignac, to the detriment of her father.

Je suis, à ma honte, plus amante que je ne suis fille. Pourquoi ? je ne sais. Toute ma vie est en vous. Mon père m'a donné un cœur, mais vous l'avez fait battre. (317)

This tendency towards inwardness of the couple becomes more apparent later on as they forget about Goriot to focus on each other, and in Rastignac's case his new apartment (319), representing the way of life he has now been ineluctably drawn into. Because of this self-centredness Goriot is at the mercy of the continued rapaciousness of Anastasie, and has gone out to sell the last of his cutlery [couverts (320)—not plates!] and some interest on his annuity, thus further endangering his health, in order to pay for Anastasie's gold lamé dress which she has ordered for the ball. She will not even bother to visit for the 1000 francs he procures, but will send a messenger for it (324).

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<sup>12</sup>The lower part of his face is composed enough, but the upper part is drawn and distorted.

Bianchon and Rastignac end up looking after Goriot, putting him through a series of medical treatments considered effective at the time (leeches, poultices etc) (324). At this point we have the final series of emotional confrontations between Rastignac and Mme de Nucingen, during which Rastignac's "education" really hits home, as the callousness of Parisian society is expressed through the woman he loves, whose behaviour is more and more explicitly described as "élégant parricide" (326). There is a flurry of letters and arguments in which Eugène explains Goriot's state and Delphine downplays his condition to insist that they focus on the approaching ball. She will express only false guilt by the thought of her sister's gold lamé dress upstaging her at the ball: "Je vais être laide, pensa-t-elle" (329), claiming that she will look after her father.

### 3.8.5. Rastignac's education

Balzac philosophizes on Rastignac's continuing lesson on "le monde", begun for him by Vautrin, taking up the themes that the convict expounded on in "L'Entrée dans le monde":

Il avait vu les trois grandes expressions de la société : l'Obéissance, la Lutte et la Révolte ; la Famille, le Monde et Vautrin. Et il n'osait prendre parti. L'Obéissance était ennuyeuse, la Révolte impossible, et la Lutte incertaine.<sup>13</sup> (327)

There is a contradiction between his awareness of the world and the risk of struggling in it, and his implication in it. The key phrase in Balzac's analysis here is "Il aimait égoïstement déjà" (327). Once again, as with Goriot's excessive love for his daughters, it is love which undermines the major characters' integrity.

### 3.8.6. Mme de Beauséant's ball

The story of Mme de Beauséant's fall from grace and withdrawal to Normandy is told to the background of the glittering pomp and ceremony of the great ball. Rastignac plays the role of trusted confidant as he goes to the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto at the Rochefide's house to fetch the casket (cassette en cèdre, 331) of letters that Mme de Beauséant has written during their relationship, which she burns when he returns with it. She also gives him a gloves-box as a token of friendship (332). The episode underlines the effect on Rastignac of being confronted with suffering and noble self-sacrifice. It shows another example he might follow if he decided to retain his integrity.

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<sup>13</sup>He had seen society in its three great phases—Obedience, Struggle, and Revolt; the Family, the World, and Vautrin; and he hesitated in his choice. Obedience was dull, Revolt impossible, Struggle hazardous.



Also in this episode Mme de Beauséant and Mme de Langeais make up, Mme de Beauséant receives the apology due to her since their discussion in Part I (107–08), which we learn is motivated by her own misfortune, since her Montriveau has abandoned her.

### 3.8.7. Caring for Goriot

Rastignac is deeply effected by what he sees at the ball. He sees the glittering display through the prism of the knowledge of Mme de Beauséant's pain, and the realization of the taudry dramas that must lie behind it (represented by Anastasie de Restaud with her jewels). He later confides to Bianchon:

Mon ami, . . . va, poursuis la destinée modeste à laquelle tu bornes tes désirs. Moi, je suis en enfer, et il faut que j'y reste. Quelque mal qu'on te dise du monde, crois-le ! <sup>14</sup> (335)

During Rastignac's and Bianchon's final attempts to stave off Goriot's death, further indignity is heaped on him as the students run out of money to pay for his treatments. Eugene is forced to guarantee his rent, to pay for fuel for his room, and to buy a shroud from Mme Vauquer, by pawning the watch that Delphine gave him as a present. Goriot's diatribes against his daughters begin as Goriot by turns expects them to arrive and is convinced they have forgotten about him. The imminence of his death seems to free him from the constraints of defending them no matter what their behaviour. He expands on what we already know about the early days of his daughters' marriages, where the sons showed him respect because they thought he must have more money left after giving 800,000 francs to each daughter in dowry (344). He demands the respect due to him as a father too late, where before he only fulfilled his role in providing for his daughters: "tout croule si les enfants n'aiment pas leurs pères" (246).

First Rastignac goes himself, then Christophe is sent to Goriot's daughters. Rastignac's encounter with Delphine provides a new meaning for the symbolic gift of the watch. As the giving of the gift represented the opening up of a new life for Rastignac, where Delphine would provide his entry into society, as well as being proof of her sentiments towards him, the fact of him having to sell it for Goriot is proof of her neglect of her father, and of Rastignac's disappointment in her character. Delphine's premature blame of Rastignac (while she is waiting for the doctor to see to her cold) for selling it is further indication of her selfishness (354–55), and her too late attempts to make up for it by procuring money for his expenses prevent her from seeing Goriot on his deathbed.

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<sup>14</sup>Dear fellow, you are content with the modest career you have marked out for yourself; keep to it. I am in hell, and I must stay there. Believe everything that you hear said of the world, nothing is too impossibly bad.

### 3.8.8. The Burial

But as we have seen in the seminars, they are too preoccupied with their marital dramas to come immediately, or to help with the money, although ironically it's Anastasie who turns up towards the end, after her husband has had her sign over her belongings to him, and after Goriot has already lost consciousness for the last time. Even after his death, Goriot does not escape ridicule, as he becomes the butt of jokes at the dinner table again, and Rastignac is turned away from his daughters' houses when he seeks money to bury him (364). Rastignac only just prevents Goriot's last remaining symbol of his daughters from being taken from him by the avaricious Mme Vauquer: the locket (médaillon) with "Delphine" and "Anastasie" on it and the locks of their hair (365) which had given him satisfaction to hold even in his semi-conscious state (358). Goriot is buried at Père Lachaise in a cheap ceremony (70 francs), with Restaud and Nucingen sending only an empty coach each to follow the hearse. The final humiliation for Rastignac is having to borrow money from Christophe to tip the gravediggers.

**Part VIII.**

**Lecture 8**

## 4. Classification of people

Balzac was keen to present Paris in terms of the (then modern) 19th-century world-view, which encompassed the idea that everything could be analysed scientifically. His description of the neighbourhood of the Maison-Vauquer is a description of the environment of his characters, and is meant to show the characters as a product of that environment. The environment and its inhabitants are linked implicitly from the first pages:

... dans cette illustre vallée de plâtras incessamment près de tomber et de ruisseaux noirs de boue ; vallée rempli de souffrances réelles, de joies souvent fausses, et si terriblement agitée qu'il faut je ne sais quoi d'exorbitant pour y produire une sensation de quelque durée.<sup>1</sup>  
(22)

The specific neighbourhood of the Latin Quarter, the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, in which Rastignac finds himself is pictured as desperately poor and uninviting, "Nul quartier de Paris n'est plus horrible, ni, disons-le, plus inconnu" (23). We therefore identify with Rastignac's desire and attempts to extricate himself from this situation, he has our sympathy, and we cheer him along.

His characters illustrate aspects of Parisian society in the same way that laboratory animals demonstrate scientific theories. He places characters in a certain situation, analyzes their characteristics, and sees how the situation affects them. His emphasis on this scientific "method", with its appeal to verifiable truth is shown in the use of the Shakespearian quotation "All is true" (22) (See endnote on same page for *King Lear* reference).

In *Le Père Goriot*, therefore, main characters are presented as representing a single idea. They are all in some way caricatures, with the notable exception of Bianchon, who appears as relatively balanced, but assumes only a minor importance in this novel. Bianchon, represents, for the sake of our laboratory analogy, the control group. Each of the characters has a particular role to play in the society described. Goriot is the father, the provider, the giver, but he has also had to walk over others to get to that position. He has taken advantage

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<sup>1</sup>in a vale of crumbling stucco watered by streams of black mud, a vale of sorrows which are real and joys too often hollow; but this audience is so accustomed to terrible sensations, that only some unimaginable and well-neigh impossible woe could produce any lasting impression there.

of the shortage of grain to make his fortune, in other words, he has taken advantage of starvation.

Balzac asks: what happens when a formerly strong creature, who has got to his position by his own cunning, has his own kind (whom he has strengthened with his own resources) exploit him ruthlessly, betraying the familial values which led him to support them, but remaining true to his values of self-concern. In other words, what happens when the law of the jungle is temporarily suppressed by the law of sentimentality? Goriot has been one of the animals of prey in this jungle society, but now he is old and it is his turn to be attacked by the young rivals growing in strength. His weakness is his daughters, as we saw in the recollections of the rival who invented the story of the accident.

The jungle will not support a situation where the stronger has no privilege over the weaker. Goriot's position as the fallen nouveau riche is represented by the mockery accorded to him at the table of the Maison-Vauquer. He has not, during his successful years, accumulated the protectors that he will need now that his strength is lessened. He is therefore the figure of fun. The other borders mock him because his daughters' visits lead them to believe that he was once powerful and has failed to protect his position successfully. They therefore represent the mob, the mass of animals that turn on the weaker member of the tribe out of some kind of primal fear that it will make the rest of the members vulnerable.

Rastignac represents a usurper in the tribe. He is the archetypal student, studying this new wilderness from the inside. He is new in the jungle, and he must at first beg (from his sisters and mother) to hitch himself to the top. He needs powerful friends (Mme de Beauséant) to protect him from his potential rivals (Maxime), he needs a powerful mate (Delphine) to bring him status. In Rastignac's case, Balzac wants to find out by his experiment: what happens to a creature who does not know how to live by the jungle's laws, who somehow receives a taste of the benefits of dominating its society. How does he reconcile the sentimental laws of family loyalty and affection with the ruthlessness necessary to rise to the top? But like the rat in the maze, most of all Balzac shows Rastignac learning the way through this wilderness. His education is one of the major themes of novel.

This "biological" classification of people, this description of society as a jungle, is hinted at in the summary of one of the boarders' (the Museum employee's) judgement of him: "l'abus des plaisirs en faisait un colimaçon [snail], un mollusque anthropomorphe à classer dans les *Casquettifères*" (55). It is reinforced by Balzac's method of describing his characters. He starts from the outside and moves in, like a good biologist. First, he describes their environment, as we've just seen, then their outer appearance, beginning with their clothes—their camouflage, to continue the analogy. Then we see the description of their bodies, their skin, and their inner maladies, if they have any, moving on to their emotional inner dramas. It is this last stage of the

investigation that takes up the bulk of the material of *Le Père Goriot*, but the uncovering of each character's secret life is not undertaken until we see the outer manifestations of this drama.

Thus, we learn first of Goriot's worsening relationships with his daughters through his worsening physical condition, made obvious by his going without powder: "la couleur de ses cheveux, ils étaient d'un gris sale et verdâtre" (53). In the same way we learn that Rastignac's once noble background is belied through his physical health and bearing "sa pose habituelle dénotait le fils d'une famille noble" (36–37) although his clothes show his present poverty "cravate noire, flétrie, mal nouée" (37). This contrast marks him out with the potential to succeed and overcome his current circumstances.

Another example of this biological motif comes in the form of comparisons of the characters with animals, particularly horses. Anastasie de Restaud dancing is compared to both a "frégate à la voile" and "cheval au galop" (74), an image that we see repeated in Mme de Beauséant's advice to Rastignac to treat people like "chevaux de poste" (115) to get to his goal, and Goriot at the last says of his daughters: "Un père . . . doit tenir ses enfants en bride comme des chevaux sournois" (343).

In this jungle that Rastignac is learning about, and that we are learning of through his eyes, Vautrin is the king. As we have already seen he is above the laws of the jungle, even his arrest doesn't seem to faze him—he sees through the attempt to get him let himself be provoked and give the police a reason to shoot him. He has escaped from prison, thus symbolizing his domination of the system which attempts to constrain him, and we expect him to do the same again. Most of all it is his knowledge of this "jungle" which makes him the master of it. He represents, in the sense of his superiority and mastery of the world of Paris, the person that Rastignac will aim to become. His disappearance at the end of *Trompe-la-Mort* only facilitates the rapid filling of his role by Rastignac. He learns more and more the truth of Vautrin's depiction of Paris, and uses it to carve out his own path.

Appropriately since he is the master of this wilderness, Vautrin himself describes Paris in biological terms. His diatribe to Rastignac is full of this sort of animal imagery. The "cinquante mille" up and coming youths in search of fortune over whom Rastignac hopes to triumph will "vous manger les uns les autres comme des araignées dans un pot"<sup>2</sup> (151). He is a little more generous when he makes a parallel between Paris fortune-seekers, in love and in business, and the hunting of the supposedly primitive tribes of his America:

Paris, voyez-vous, est comme une forêt du Nouveau-Monde, où s'agitent vingt espèces de peuplades sauvages, les Illinois, les Hurons, qui vivent du produit que donnent les différentes chasses sociales; vous êtes un chasseur de millions. Pour les prendre, vous usez de pièges,

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<sup>2</sup>you must fight and devour one another like spiders in a pot.

de pipeaux [bird-calls], d'appeaux [decoys]. Il y a plusieurs manières de chasser. Les uns chassent à la dot; les autres chassent à la liquidation [selling shares]; ceux-ci pêchent des consciences [vote-buying], ceux-là vendent leurs abonnés [sell their newspaper houses] pieds et poings liés.<sup>3</sup> (156, cf. endnotes)

The technique of comparing the complex system with one that is understood to be simpler and more straightforward has a lot of credibility in science, and has been relied upon a great deal until vast computational power has provided an alternative to this reductionist approach. In using this technique, Balzac lends credibility and depth to his works, although it must always be borne in mind that Balzac's intention was first and foremost to entertain.

The closing page of the novel underlines the biological motif again, where Rastignac looks over Paris: "Il lança sur cette ruche bourdonnant un regard qui semblait par avance en pomper le miel"<sup>4</sup> (367).

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<sup>3</sup>Paris, you see, is like a forest in the New World, where you have to deal with a score of varieties of savages—Illinois and Hurons, who live on the proceed of their social hunting. You are a hunter of millions; you set your snares; you use lures and nets; there are many ways of hunting. Some hunt heiresses, others a legacy; some fish for souls, yet others sell their clients, bound hand and foot.

<sup>4</sup>He glanced over that humming hive, seeming to draw a foretaste of its honey, [and said magniloquently:

"Henceforth there is war between us."]

**Part IX.**

**Lecture 9**



## 5. Thematic structure

### 5.1. Morality and wealth

The development of the major themes of *Le Père Goriot* follows a regular pattern, with one theme influencing the others. In the case of morality and material success, it is no surprise, considering the picture we have of Paris so far in the novel, that these are considered to be diametrically opposed, even when we examine their development in an abstract sense. Therefore, Goriot gains in moral stature throughout the action of the novel, starting from the point where he is regarded as a likely degenerate who supports loose women of the aristocracy in return for sexual favours, and ending as a Christ-like figure of self-sacrifice. At the same time, however, his material situation becomes progressively more precarious throughout the action of the novel, as it has even before the action proper begins, as we learn from the accounts of Mme Vauquer on the rich furnishings with which he first decorated his apartments on the first floor.

Parallel to this development, we have the decline in moral values in Rastignac's character, accompanied by his increasing success in the material world. This is paralleled in part also by his changing concern for his sisters, especially Laure, who writes the poignant letter to him in response to his request for money. Her letter obliquely makes light of the kind of world into which Rastignac hopes to penetrate, by making self-deprecating reference to the objects which her and her sister were planning to purchase with their savings: "Agathe et moi nous voulions employer notre argent de tant de manières différentes, que nous ne savions plus à quel achat nous résoudre" (134).

At this stage of the novel (beginning of "L'Entrée dans le monde") Rastignac's moral stature is illustrated by the effect the goodness of his sister evident in the letter has on him: "Des trésors ne payerait pas ce douement" (138). Reluctant to call on their good will at the moment of writing the letters, "il éprouva une trépidation involontaire" (123), he recognizes their goodness in the letter they send. But where, on sending the letters, he declared: "Le cœur d'une sœur est un diamant de pureté, un abîme de tendresse!" (123), on receiving the letters, he is already mixing gratitude with desire for success: "Oh! oui, se dit Eugène, oui, la fortune à tout prix!" (138) (foreshadowing the words of Vautrin: "parvenir à tout prix", 151).

This development is continued later when we see, first, the mention that his

walk in the park with his new clothes makes him forget his sisters: “En se voyant l’objet d’une attention presque admirative, il ne pensa plus à ses sœurs ni à sa tante dépuillées”<sup>1</sup> (165). Then, Rastignac’s concern for his sisters is later reduced to the value of a mere footnote, as the narrator informs us that 1500 francs have been repaid to his family, along with “de jolis présents” (207). Subsequent to this his family disappears from his concerns, and therefore from the novel (since we see the action through Rastignac’s eyes) until on Goriot’s death-bed he apparently writes more letters to them (323).

Even Victorine Taillefer’s development runs parallel to Rastignac’s in this scheme, although her moral progression is much more slight. Her attraction to Rastignac, and her extremely limited complicity in encouraging this attraction (she is not to know that his motivation is financial rather than sentimental), result in her elevation from the status of unrecognized child, devoid of support, to the heiress of a wealthy banker. The lack of proportion between the sin and the material reward in this case is the result of the unnatural intervention of an actual crime by another: Vautrin’s conspiracy with Franchessini. Vautrin has generously taken on the moral burden of Victorine’s success in expectation of a future reward for himself.

Mlle Michonneau’s exchange of moral values for personal gain is another example, in the pension which she obtains for herself for turning in Vautrin, knowing that he is supposed to be killed in the arrest.

Delphine’s elevation in society, culminating in her presence at Mme de Beauséant’s ball, at the same time as her moral decline as perceived through the eyes of Rastignac, is another example. We note that in contrast Anastasie’s material wealth is stripped from her by her husband de Restaud at the same time as she redeems herself slightly by appearing at her father’s bedside.

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<sup>1</sup>This almost admiring attention gave a new turn to his thoughts. He forgot his sisters and the aunt who had robbed herself for him

## 6. Enigma and mystery

### 6.1. Hidden secrets

To recap the theme introduced in the first lecture, Balzac wants to present us with a mystery, which Rastignac, in the process of his “education”, goes about unravelling. We have seen the way he uncovers the mystery of Goriot’s past in the first part of the novel, and we have seen him discover the mystery of Vautrin despite himself along the way. Other characters are uncovering mysteries in the novel also: Mme de Beauséant refuses to learn the truth about Ajuda-Pinto until the very end, and Anastasie de Restaud is similarly reluctant to admit to the truth about de Maxime de Trailles. Delphine de Nucingen also discovers that her husband’s dealings are even more dubious than she had assumed.

All of these characters’ disillusionments and enlightenments are a reflection of Rastignac’s education with regard to “la vie”—the life of Paris. They all show that in all social dealings there is something shameful hidden, that the appearance of propriety masks sordid (or in Goriot’s case obsessive) desires and motivations. Linked to this theme of hidden secrets is the recurrent motif of murder in the novel.

### Murder

Vautrin’s plotting to kill the young Taillefer for the sake of his sister’s inheritance is merely the overt manifestation of an important thematic idea in the novel. *Le Père Goriot* distinguishes itself by its concern for hidden and overt killing, the parallels and subtle differences between the two. Apart from Vautrin’s arrangement of the killing of the young Taillefer, Mlle Michonneau conspires in a plan whose object is Vautrin’s death.

But hidden killings are equally lethal. Vautrin’s speech to Rastignac emphasized this point: “L’homme en gants et à paroles jaunes a commis des assassinats où l’on ne verse pas de sang”. Ruining lives is the equivalent of killing in 19th-century Paris, as is still is for many. Thus Goriot’s impotent threats to kill his sons-in-law while his daughters are ruining him is so poignant and ironic. The truth of Vautrin’s stand is illustrated to the extreme where we see that leeching money from a poor man is even more effective in killing than actual violence.

Apart from the hidden killing by Anastasie and Delphine of their father, we see the same attitude in Maxime's effect on the affairs of the de Restauds, and Ajuda-Pinto's on the de Beauséants. M de Taillefer's treatment of Victorine falls into this category, as well as Montriveau's, Mme de Langeais' lover's, treatment of her. If we examine the fate of these victims of neglect, exploitation, or crime, we see a death or a kind of death waiting for each of them. The narrative emphasizes this with constant references of the motif of death and killing.

## 6.2. Conclusion

Balzac has created a miniature universe with *Le Père Goriot*, where the characters have lives which extend beyond the powers of a single narrative to encompass. We get a sense of these lives, and a sense especially of the necessity of compromising one's principles to get along in life. No one is immune, everyone is only more or less corrupt, muddied by the mire Balsac discusses. The only really honorable characters are the ones who are determined to escape, recognizing the inescapable corrupting influence of this world, and one's powerlessness to change it.

**Part X.**

**Coursework**

# FREN212: Balzac

## Oral Presentation Topics

- Write your name on the noticeboard next to a time which suits you to give your oral presentation on Wednesday, June 4, in room 3C14.
  - This assessment is worth 10% of your final mark, with the better mark of this and your Flaubert *viva* to count.
  - Choose ONE of the passages below, and prepare a short speech (5–10 minutes) on ONE of the following topics, as it relates to the passage. Please have a copy of your notes to leave with your listeners after your speech.
1. Discuss the way the passage illuminates the development of at least one of the characters who feature in it.
  2. Discuss the importance of the passage to the development of the plot of the novel.

### Extract 1

— Mais, mes enfants, dit le père Goriot qui depuis six ans n'avait pas senti le cœur de sa fille battre sur le sien, mais, Delphinette, tu veux donc me faire mourir de joie ! Mon pauvre cœur se brise. Allez, monsieur Eugène, nous sommes déjà quittes ! Et le vieillard serrait sa fille par une étreinte si sauvage, si délirante, qu'elle dit : — Ah ! tu me fais mal. — Je t'ai fait mal ! dit-il en pâissant. Il la regarda d'un air surhumain de douleur. Pour bien peindre la physionomie de ce Christ de la Paternité, il faudrait aller chercher des comparaisons dans les images que les princes de la palette ont inventées pour peindre la passion soufferte au bénéfice des mondes par le Sauveur des hommes. Le père Goriot baisa bien doucement la ceinture que ses doigts avait trop pressée. — Non, non, je ne t'ai pas fait mal ; non, reprit-il en la questionnant par un sourire ; c'est toi que m'as fait mal avec ton cri. Ça coûte plus cher, dit-il à l'oreille de sa fille en la lui baisant avec précaution, mais il faut l'attraper, sans quoi il se fâcherait.

Eugène était pétrifié par l'inépuisable dévouement de cet homme, et le contemplait en exprimant cette naïve admiration qui, au jeune âge, est de la foi.

— Je serai digne de tout cela, s'écria-t-il. (281-82)

## Extract 2

— Eh bien ! comment va mon père ? lui dit madame de Nucingen quand il fut de retour et en costume de bal.

— Extrêmement mal, répondit-il, si vous voulez me donner une preuve de votre affection, nous courrons le voir.

— Eh bien, oui, dit-elle, mais après le bal. Mon bon Eugène, sois gentil, ne me fais pas de morale, viens.

Ils partirent. Eugène resta silencieux pendant une partie du chemin.

— Qu'avez-vous donc ? dit-elle.

— J'entends le râle de votre père, répondit-il avec l'accent de la fâcherie. Et il se mit à raconter avec la chaleureuse éloquence du jeune âge la féroce action à laquelle madame de Restaud avait été poussée par la vanité, la crise mortelle que le dernier dévouement du père avait déterminée, et ce que coûterait la robe lamée d'Anastasie. Delphine pleurait.

— Je vais être laide, pensa-t-elle. Ses larmes se séchèrent. J'irai garder mon père, je ne quitterai pas son chevet, reprit-elle.

— Ah ! te voilà comme je te voulais, s'écria Rastignac. (328-29)

## **7. Seminar topics**



# Extract A

— Quelle sottise avez-vous donc faite, monsieur ?

...

— Mais, enfant que vous êtes, s'écria la vicomtesse, madame de Restaud est une demoiselle Goriot. ("Une Pension bourgeoise", 108–10)

## Characters

In this episode we see the young law student Eugène de Rastignac, his distant cousin Claire the Vicomtesse de Beauséant, and her friend Antoinette the Duchesse de Langeais.

## Context

This episode interrupts the insistent announcement by Mme de Langeais that Mme de Beauséant's lover Ajuda-Pinto is to be married. The narrator has informed us of the acquiescence of M de Beauséant to the relationship with Ajuda-Pinto, and that

Monsieur d'Ajuda devait se marier. Il épousait une demoiselle de Rochefide. Dans toute la houte société une seule personne ignorait encore ce mariage, cette personne était madame de Beauséant. (100)

When Mme de Langeais arrives Ajuda-Pinto has just left, ostensibly to excuse himself from a dinner date at the British embassy, but Mme de Beauséant has heard him ordering the carriage to the Rochefides'. She has sent him a terse note demanging an explanation.

Mme de Beauséant therefore has this apparent perfidy of her lover's on her mind when her friend arrives. Although friends, the jealousy between the two women is such that Mme de Langeais goes out of her way to exacerbate the sensitivity of Mme de Beauséant on the subject, announcing her arrival with the news that she saw Ajuda-Pinto at the Rochefides', "j'ai pensé qu'alors vous étiez seule" (107), she teases. She ignores Mme de Beauséant's attempts to downplay the matter, or to deflect it with talk af her own neglectful lover, General Montriveau. Instead Mme de Langeaus talks up the attributes of the supposed bride mercilessly ("mademoiselle de Rochefide est charmante" (108)), until Mme de Beauséant is forced to profit from Rastignac's presence to deflect the subject back to his recent adventures with her: "Quelle sottise avez-vous donc faite, monsieur?" In doing so she also makes Rastignac the target of Mme de Langeais' scorn, and we see the continuation of Rastignac's trial by fire in the salons of Paris:

La duchesse tourna sur Eugène un de ces regards impertinents qui enveloppent un homme des pieds à la tête, l'aplatissent, et le mettent à l'état de zéro. (108)

[The Duchess gave Eugene one of those insolent glances that measure a man from head to foot, and leave him crushed and annihilated.]

He has finally found safe waters, however, as he finally breaks through the veil of Paris society to the extent that he has understood the motivation of Mme de Langeais' barbs and the effect they have on his cousin. He makes the most of his opportunity, and makes rare use of his wit to soothe her pain, all the while appearing to speak of his own clumsiness:

Vous continuez à voir, et vous craignez peut-être les gens qui sont dans le secret du mal qu'ils vous font, tandis que celui qui blesse en ignorant la profondeur de sa blessure est regardé comme un sot, un maladroit qui ne sait profiter de rien, et chacun le méprise. (108–09)

These people Rastignac refers to undoubtedly include the Duchesse de Langeais at that moment, and Mme de Beauséant realizes it and accords him all her favour for this valiant gesture of sympathy in front of such a harsh judge. Her "regard fondant", in its sincerity and honest good faith, is a stark contrast to the superficial announcement of his heritage by Mme de Restaud which rescued his dignity previously (91). The "coup de baton" has been replaced with a "baume qui calma la plaie" of his wounded pride. As well as the withering look from Mme de Langeais, he has had an entire day of indignities: the long wait at the de Restauds', the rich dress and insolence of Maxime de Trailles, his faux pas over Goriot, his ignorance with the cab driver. This look from Mme de Beauséant is the symbol of her coming vital assistance in conquering the world of Paris.

Rastignac makes the most of his small victory in stealing the show from Mme de Langeais by increasing her discomfort further. In this he uses the only reliable weapons in his arsenal: his youth and his poverty. Mme de Langeais is obviously discomfited by Rastignac's admission: "je ne suis encore qu'un pauvre diable d'étudiant, bien seul, bien pauvre" (109) and even more so by his ingenuous commentary on Paris salon society:

il est impossible de se mettre à genoux dans un plus joli confessional : on y fait des péchés dont on s'accuse dans l'autre" (109).

it would be impossible to kneel in a more charming confessional; you commit your sins in one drawing-room, and receive absolution for them in another.

His banter continues to amuse Mme de Beauséant, who laughs outright at his impertinence and at Mme de Langeais' prudish reaction, which is to address Mme de Beauséant in asking about Rastignac's arrival vaguely in the third person: "Monsieur arrive..." (109).

Rastignac continues to hog the stage, however, and reveals his past desire to know Mme de Restaud more intimately. Balzac reveals his continuing naivety in the matter of wit by revealing his self-assured thought that his circuituous language is up to scratch (“des phrases de coiffeur”). Despite his lack of finesse, he makes up for it by having, apparently, something in the way of gossip to impart: the presence of the old man, who had given Mme de Restaud a kiss. Their simultaneous exclamation : “Qui est-ce?” (110) cannot help but bolster his confidence. He now has a duchess and a vicountess hanging on his every word, for the first time in his life.

The effect is not much lessened by the anticlimax regarding Goriot’s relationship to Mme de Restaud. The two women were hoping for a whiff of scandal, and only received confirmation of what they already knew. For Rastignac, however, this is the great revelation of this part of the novel. His understanding of the depth of cynicism of Paris society is finally demonstrated in a way that he cannot ignore, through the character of the man with which he has become so well acquainted (Goriot), and the character of the woman he has lately affected to pursue (Anastasia). In the passage that follows, while the the women muse over the *bon mot* of the king (Louis XVIII) on meeting Anastasia<sup>1</sup>, Rastignac can only begin to take in the idea that Goriot’s daughters do not acknowledge them: “Elles ont renié leur père” (111). In the next few pages he learns almost everything he needs to know about the relationship between these family members.

## Themes

Youth, poverty, wit, class, dignity, friendship, protection, taste, enlightenment.

## Style

Comparison of the tone of the two women, at ease with the hidden meanings of their subtle discourse, and Rastignac, trying to make an impression with his clever insights and outrageous statements.

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<sup>1</sup>*Ejusdem farinae*: De la même farine. Se prend toujours en mauvaise part, pour établir une comparaison entre personnes ayant mêmes vices, mêmes défauts, etc. [Locutio.com]

## **Extract B**

Le plus pauvre commissionnaire était certes moins mal meublé dans son grenier . . . Enfin, je vis trois fois. (180–81)

## Characters

In this extract Eugène de Rastignac is talking to Goriot. Rastignac is on the way up at this point, while Goriot still has some hope of contributing to his daughters' happiness. Goriot is in his consummate role as the father living vicariously through his daughters.

They talk of his daughters, chiefly Delphine, but Goriot compares her to Anastasie, giving her credit for affection towards him which is perhaps not deserved. Delphine, on the other hand, has appeared sincere in her affection, as Rastignac recounts here, thus setting the reader up for the gross disappointment with regard to her attitude to her father when he is actually dying (she castigates Rastignac for holding her up for Mme de Beauséant's ball, sleeps in and complains she is ill, rather than come to see him in the morning, and finally resolves to come only when she knows he will die soon. Eventually she faints during an argument with her husband over money for the burial, and doesn't see him before he dies.

Goriot also makes oblique reference to his sons-in-law: "si j'avais eu de bons gendres" (180). These are the ones that he will curse on his death-bed later: "A mort le Restaud, à mort l'Alsacien, ils sont mes assassins!" (350).

## Context

This passage follows directly the first really successful entry of Rastignac into society, when he goes to the Théâtre des Italiens and seduces Delphine de Nucingen. It presages their relationship, during which he is elevated in society to the point where he moves to the Rue d'Artois into an apartment provided for him by Goriot. Goriot's apparent happiness in this passage foreshadows the approaching glimmer of hope for him, that he will live in the Rue d'Artois above Rastignac and enjoy his vicarious existence in greater comfort and proximity to Delphine.

His concern with his daughters' outfits at the theatre presages the later importance of Anastasie's dress, for which Goriot must take his last plates to pawn in order to pay for it, because her credit is no longer good. The effort he is forced to expend when he is already suffering from the apoplexy is one of the deciding factors in his rapid death.

At this point in the action the sons-in-law already mentioned have only prevented Goriot from being received at his daughters' house, but later Restaud will almost prevent Anastasie from coming to see him on his death-bed because of her money troubles and illegitimate children (caused by Maxime), and Nucingen's bad investments will prevent Delphine from providing for a decent burial.

## Themes

- **Paternity:** Goriot wants to be Rastignac's father. Goriot lives vicariously through his daughters: "on est bien plus heureux de leur bonheur que du sien propre" (181). He excuses all their faults (Anastasia's here). He shows that he loves them equally, as a father should, and that this love is not necessarily returned. Goriot will expound on this paternal condition on his deathbed also: "n'ayez pas d'enfants! Vous leur donnez la vie, ils vous donnent la mort" (343).
- **Love:** Rastignac expresses genuine affection for Delphine, free of considerations of money etc, and this is underscored by its expression in terms of appreciation of her love for her father. Goriot says "elle m'aime bien" (180) with regard to Delphine. These sentiments are to be disappointed, however, and Goriot will later express this disappointment in the counterpointed "Moi seul suis coupable, mais coupable par amour" (347), and in the assertion that they never loved him: "Elles n'ont jamais rien su deviner de mes chagrins, de mes douleurs, de mes besoins" (348).
- **Jealousy:** Related to the theme of paternity is that of jealousy and sibling rivalry. Goriot equates the jealousy of the two with their affection for him, whereas we learn later that their jealousy concerns mainly their respective stations in society. Their jealousy expressed in the most bitter terms over his sick-bed (308 ff) will be the moral blow (coup violent, 316) that leads to his death.

## Style

The manner in which Goriot expresses himself in this passage underlines the simplicity of the man, the unpretentiousness "je ne sais pas dire deux paroles de suite comme il faut" (181). The physicality of Goriot is also emphasized, and we have the impression of a man who was once vigorous and energetic: "Tout est là, ajouta-t-il en se frappant le cœur" (181). His description of the feeling of satisfaction from fatherhood is also visceral: "vous vous croirez attaché à leur peau" etc. (181).

# Extract C



L'honnêteté ne sert à rien. . . . Mais il faudra lutter contre l'envie, la calomnie, la médiocrité, contre tout le monde. (152–53)

## Characters

Although the passage concerns most of all Vautrin and his personal worldview, it is also instructive in what it can tell us about the type of person Rastignac is set to become. As the archetypal student, Rastignac can be expected to absorb the information that Vautrin provides at this early stage, and apply the principles learned later in the novel and indeed in *La Comédie humaine*.

## Context

Part of Vautrin's diatribe against Paris society in which he unveils his plans to help elevate Rastignac in the world by marrying him to Victorine Taillefer, and securing a percentage of her dowry for himself. This passage constitutes part of the "theoretical" portion of Rastignac's education, where he learns the necessity of forsaking his received principles of diligence and virtue, as being useless in the corrupt and ruthless world of Paris high society.

## Themes

**Virtue** (l'honnêteté) Vautrin redefines our conception of honesty. An honest man is "celui qui se tait, et refuse de partager" (152). The assumption is that everyone is out for themselves, so the only honest person is one who doesn't pretend otherwise. "[L'homme] est parfois plus ou moins hypocrite, et les niais disent alors qu'il a ou il n'a pas de mœurs" (153).

**Intelligence** (le génie) "on l'adore aux genoux quand on n'a pas pu l'enterrer sous la boue" (152). Underlines that even this hope for success is uncertain, since it arouses the indignation of the mediocre, and therefore their corrupt efforts to bury it.

**Corruption** "Vous verrez des femmes se prostituer pour aller dans une voiture du fils d'un pair (peer) de France" (152). Graphic illustration of the extent to which people will go for even the appearance of power.

**Vanity** Of women and their dealings with their husbands: "Les trafics qui se font pour des amants, pour des chiffons [rags] . . . pour la vanité, rarement par vertu" (152).

**Success** Key phrase: "Si donc vous voulez promptement la fortune, il faut être déjà riche ou le paraître" (153). Appearing to be rich will be necessary for Rastignac to succeed.

## **Style**

Colourful language, use of metaphor, illustrates Vautrin's imagination, intelligence and flair. Eg.: "il faut se salir les mains si l'on veut fricoter [cook]; sachez seulement vous bien débarbouiller [clean o.s.]" (153). The language also illustrates his wide experience of society, his familiarity with different registers, and underlines his ability to make abstract analyses of Paris society.

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