

BALZAC OLD ORIOT

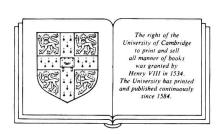
DAVID BELLOS

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Old Goriot

DAVID BELLOS

Professor of French Studies University of Manchester



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Honoré de Balzac

OLD GORIOT

Landmarks of world literature

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Jean-Paul Sartre, Words

Or, le sentiment du Père Goriot implique la maternité . . . Balzac

Chronology

History 14 July: storming of the Bastille Execution of Louis XVI 'The Terror': mass executions of real and suspected opponents of	the Revolution Napoleon Bonaparte elected Consul Napoleon crowned Emperor of France	French armies invade Russia French armies withdraw from Russia in disarray Napoleon capitulates at Fontainebleau, Louis XVIII	Napoleon escapes from exile in Elba and leads reassembled army to defeat at Waterloo. Louis XVIII restored to the throne for a second time	
Biography	20 May: Honoré Balzac born at Tours Balzac sent as a boarder to the Collège des Oratoriens at	Vendôme Balzac leaves Vendôme for a boarding school in Paris At school in Tours, then Paris, where his family settle		Apprenticed to the lawyer Guillonnet-Merville
Literature 1789 1793	1799 1805	1812 1813 1814 Walter Scott, Waverley	1815 Jane Austen, Emma	1816

	Invention of Diorama	Napoleon dies on Saint Helena	Death of Louis XVIII. Succeeded by his brother, Charles X First steam trains (Britain)	
Balzac's father, Bernard-François, retires. Honoré leaves the law practice and is allowed to stay in Paris 'to become a writer'. Writes <i>Cromwell</i> , a tragedy, published posthumously Begins <i>Falthurne</i> (unfinished)	Begins Sténie (unfinished) Publishes novels written in collaboration under the pseudonyms of Lord R'Hoone and Horace de Saint-Aubin	La Dernière Fée	Annette et le criminel Publishes Molière and La Fontaine in pocket editions; Wann-Chlore	Buys a printing works Sets up type-founding business Businesses go into liquidation, leaving Balzac with heavy debts to his family Death of Bernard-François Balzac; Le Dernier Chouan; La Physiologie du mariage. Balzac begins to visit the salons and to write for newspapers and reviews
Victor Hugo founds the Conservateur littéraire Walter Scott, Ivanhoe Lamartine, Méditations poétiques	Hugo, <i>Odes et poésies diverses</i>	Scott, Quentin Durward; Hugo, Han d'Islande; Lamartine, Nouvelles méditations	Death of Byron at Missolonghi	Hugo, Odes et ballades

History Charles X overthrown in the July Revolution. Succeeded by Louis- Philippe d'Orléans	Guizot's budget speech: 'Enrichissez-vous'	Cholera epidemics in Paris and London	Signs of social unrest; Lyon silk workers strike	First passenger steam train in France Invention of photography by	Daguerre
Biography Scènes de la vie privée, the first collective publication of stories. Many of them appear in the Revue de Paris and the Revue des Deux Mondes	La Peau de chagrin favourably reviewed. Balzac now an established writer	Contacted by 'L'Etrangère', Mme Hanska. Louis Lambert, first version Contract for 8-volume Etudes de moeurs au XIXe siècle; Le Médecin de campagne; Eugénie	Orander La Recherche de l'absolu; Le Père Goriot Séraphita. Spends 3 weeks with Mme Hanska in Vienna Le Lys dans la vallée	La Vieille Fille; Illusions perdues, part 1; César Birotteau La Maison Nucingen Appointed president of the	newly-formed societe des gens de lettres
Literature Stendhal, Le Rouge et le Noir (Scarlet and Black) Hugo, Hernani	Hugo, <i>Notre-Dame de Paris</i>	Deaths of Goethe and Walter Scott, George Sand, Indiana	The Pickwick Papers, Musset,	Dickens, Oliver Twist	

Louis-Philippe deposed in a revolution; Second Republic declared; Lamartine elected	president Louis-Napoleon elected 'Prince- president'
Vautrin (a play); founds La Rewue parisienne Signs contract for the full edition of La Comedie humaine; Le Curé de village La Rabouilleuse Completion of Illusions perdues; La Muse du départment Modeste Mignon; Les Paysans; Béatrix Travels to Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy Italy, Germany again; La Cousine Bette Le Cousine Pons, completing volume 17 of the Furne edition. La Dernière Incarnation de Vautrin Travels to Mme Hanska's estate in the Ukraine	In the Ukraine again, in poor health Marries Mme Hanska at Berdichev on 14 March. Returns to Paris on 20 May. Dies on 18 August
Stendhal, La Chartreuse de Parme Gogol, Dead Souls Victor Hugo becomes pair de France George Sand, La Mare au diable; Dostoevsky, Poor Folk	Dickens, David Copperfield
1840 1841 1843 1844 1845 1846 1846 1848	1849

Note on the text

Page numbers following quotations in French from *Le Père Goriot* refer to the Garnier-Flammarion paperback edition, GF 112, with an introduction by Pierre Citron, Paris, 1966. Translations are my own.

Quotations from all other works by Balzac are from *La Comédie humaine*, general editor Pierre-Georges Castex, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pleïade), 12 volumes, 1976–81. This edition is designated by the abbreviation *Pl*, followed by volume number in roman figures and page numbers in arabic.

References to letters written and received by Balzac are to *Correspondance*, edited by Roger Pierrot, Garnier, 5 volumes, 1960–9, designated by the abbreviation *Corr* followed by volume and page numbers; and to *Lettres à Madame Hanska*, edited by Roger Pierrot, Aux Bibliophiles de l'Originale, 5 volumes, 1968–74, designated by the abbreviation *LH* followed by volume and page numbers.

Details of other works quoted, indicated in the text by the name of the author and, where appropriate, page number, will be found in the bibliography.

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Introduction

Old Goriot is a complex work of art which seeks to represent the complexity of life. In this introductory study I will necessarily simplify Balzac's novel to some degree by explaining and discussing separately features which are woven into each other in the text itself. My aim is not to replicate the impact of Old Goriot, but to provide the modern reader with information which will help him or her to understand how complex Balzac's novel is. In Chapter 1, I deal principally with the processes which lead to the final shape and material of Old Goriot; Chapter 2 is concerned mainly with looking at four related aspects of what the novel achieves.

Balzac's novels have ceased to be easy texts for modern readers to understand and enjoy without effort. Because its action is in a social, historical, and geographical setting which was intended to be familiar to its original audience but is now dead and gone, Old Goriot presupposes a certain amount of knowledge which modern readers, by and large, do not have. Balzac's particular way of combining fact with fiction, descriptions of settings with character analyses, individual life with social environment, has had an enormous impact on the subsequent course of the European novel, and as a consequence on our own general expectations of what novels should be like, so that it is hard for us to perceive, let alone enjoy, the novelty and inventiveness of Old Goriot. Habits of language have also changed in the last hundred and fifty years almost as much as everyday habits, and these changes make it relatively difficult for a modern reader to respond appropriately to Balzac's stylistic verve and humour. As with all works of past ages, there is a danger that history in its various forms (social, literary, and

linguistic history) may have combined to transform *Old Goriot* from a living, complex work of art into a dusty and obscure museum piece. The aim of this book is not to brush aside the dust of history, but to provide the knowledge needed to read Balzac's novel in its own context. The effort of acquiring that knowledge is rewarded by the possibility of rediscovering a novel which integrates in a quite remarkable and moving way the fundamental conflicts of social life, and which still gives a masterful representation of the complexity of a world which, in the last analysis, is not very different from our own.

Old Goriot is a novel which weaves together three separate tales: the tale of Eugène de Rastignac, the young man starting out on life and learning how to make his way in Parisian society; the tale of Vautrin, a forty-year-old arch-criminal attempting to extend his power from its secret base in the underworld to control indirectly the life of a socially respectable young man; and the tale of the old man, Jean-Joachim Goriot, dying in poverty, unloved and unaided by his two daughters to whom he has given every ounce of his love, and every penny of the fortune he made in the flour trade. In 1819, when the action of Old Goriot commences, all three protagonists are lodgers at the boarding house of Madame Vauquer, a shabby and mysterious place located in one of the dark corners of the Latin Quarter, where nothing is quite what it seems, and certainly not what its proprietress, Madame Vauquer, claims it to be.

Eugène de Rastignac has set out with the best intentions and aims to make his way to the top through hard work, and to repay his family the sacrifices they have made to support him through his studies for a degree in law. But little by little, he lets his studies slip, as he is drawn at the start of his second year towards the glamour of the wealthy society of the grande bourgeoisie and the aristocracy which flaunts itself in the capital, and to which he has access by virtue of his nobility and a letter of introduction from his mother's aunt to a prominent society lady, Madame de Beauséant. Rastignac learns rather

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abruptly that 'high' society, like the 'low' society of the lodging house, is not what it seems. The wealthy and beautiful Anastasie de Restaud whom he meets at the first ball he attends turns out not only to be a commoner by birth, but the daughter of the retired flour-merchant who shares his lodgings in the Latin Quarter. Madame de Beauséant, noble and rich as she is, is also on the brink of despair and on the point of being abandoned by her lover, Ajuda-Pinto, for a younger and even wealthier bride. She advises Rastignac to seduce Goriot's other daughter, Delphine, the wife of a bourgeois banker, in order to establish his position in Parisian society. And that is what Rastignac does in the course of the novel.

Vautrin, whose real name is Jacques Collin, is lying low at the Vauquer lodging house after escaping from forced labour. He sees what it is Rastignac wants - wealth, position, prominence and tells the young man in forceful terms that he will not achieve such ambitions honestly. All great fortunes, he claims, are the fruits of secret crimes neatly hidden. He offers the handsome student a deal; he will have the son of the millionaire Taillefer eliminated in a trumped-up duel, if Rastignac will seduce and marry the banker's daughter Victorine, currently disinherited by her father, and also lodging at the Vauquer house; in return, Rastignac would pay Vautrin a commission of twenty per cent on the million-franc dowry he would undoubtedly extract from his father-in-law once the latter is bereft of a male heir. Rastignac hesitates; he has no feelings for the pallid Victorine, but the pact offers rapid access to a fortune which could only be got, if it could be got at all, through a lifetime of hypocrisy and petty crime. He hesitates for sufficiently long to fail to prevent the first stage of the plot taking place, and Victorine's brother is killed in a duel provoked on purpose by Vautrin's associate. But the arch-criminal is the most wanted man in Paris, and two further lodgers at the Vauguer house. Poiret and Michonneau, turn out to be informers and stool-pigeons; they trap the ex-convict, who is arrested and taken off by the police.

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The story of how Goriot himself came to be a down-at-heel lodger in a shabby boarding-house whilst his two daughters lead lives of spendthrift luxury is revealed piece by piece through the discoveries Rastignac makes in his adventures and blunders in high society, through Vautrin's uncanny insight, and through the visits that Delphine and Anastasie make to the house. Once Vautrin has been removed from the scene and the Victorine plot put aside, the novel focuses firmly on the twin tales of the dying father and the ungrateful children. In a long monologue, Goriot goes over the story of his life as a parent and the issues it raises: had he done wrong by giving in to his daughters too easily in their childhood? Is he to blame for their present ingratitude? Or are they to blame for their own financial and emotional problems? Rastignac alone tends the dying man throughout his agony, but he also attends to Delphine and takes her to the great ball given by Madame de Beauséant, which represents to Delphine a satisfying revenge on her elder, aristocratically married sister. This close juxtaposition of splendour and squalor heightens the pathos of Goriot's death; the flashes of insight the old man has in his last moments into the nature of his daughters and of himself render his suffering properly tragic. The novel ends with Goriot's desolate funeral attended only by Rastignac and the empty carriages of two wealthy households, after which the young man of ambition, his education completed, walks back down in the city to proceed with his conquest of a mistress.

The making of Old Goriot

The novel, the writer, and the reading public

It is hard to imagine a human society of any kind that does not have some way of telling stories. However, the particular form of story-telling that we now call the novel is of relatively recent date, and our present conception of it owes much to Balzac. Before him, of course, long stories written in prose and dealing with imaginary characters had entertained broad audiences for many centuries; but, with rare exceptions, prior to the nineteenth century, novels were considered by writers and readers alike as entertainment and not as part of serious literature, which tended to be restricted principally to drama and verse. The novel, before Balzac, was by no means a simple, homogeneous literary genre, but three main varieties can be identified: picaresque novels, such as Cervantes' Don Quixote or Fielding's Tom Jones, which recount the adventures of a usually male, and usually young, hero in more or less serious conflict with the society he finds himself excluded from; the novel of analysis, such as La Princesse de Clèves by Mme de La Fayette or, on a larger canvas, Rousseau's La Nouvelle Héloise, dealing with the development of characters' inner feelings, most usually in connection with an amorous intrigue; and, in the eighteenth century, the parodic novel - Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Diderot's Jacques le fataliste are the best-known examples of this tradition - which creates sophisticated types of comedy by undermining and parodying the conventions of the picaresque and analytical novels. Old Goriot looks back to all three of these earlier kinds of novel in obvious ways: it tells the tale of a young man struggling to enter a society from which he is excluded, it