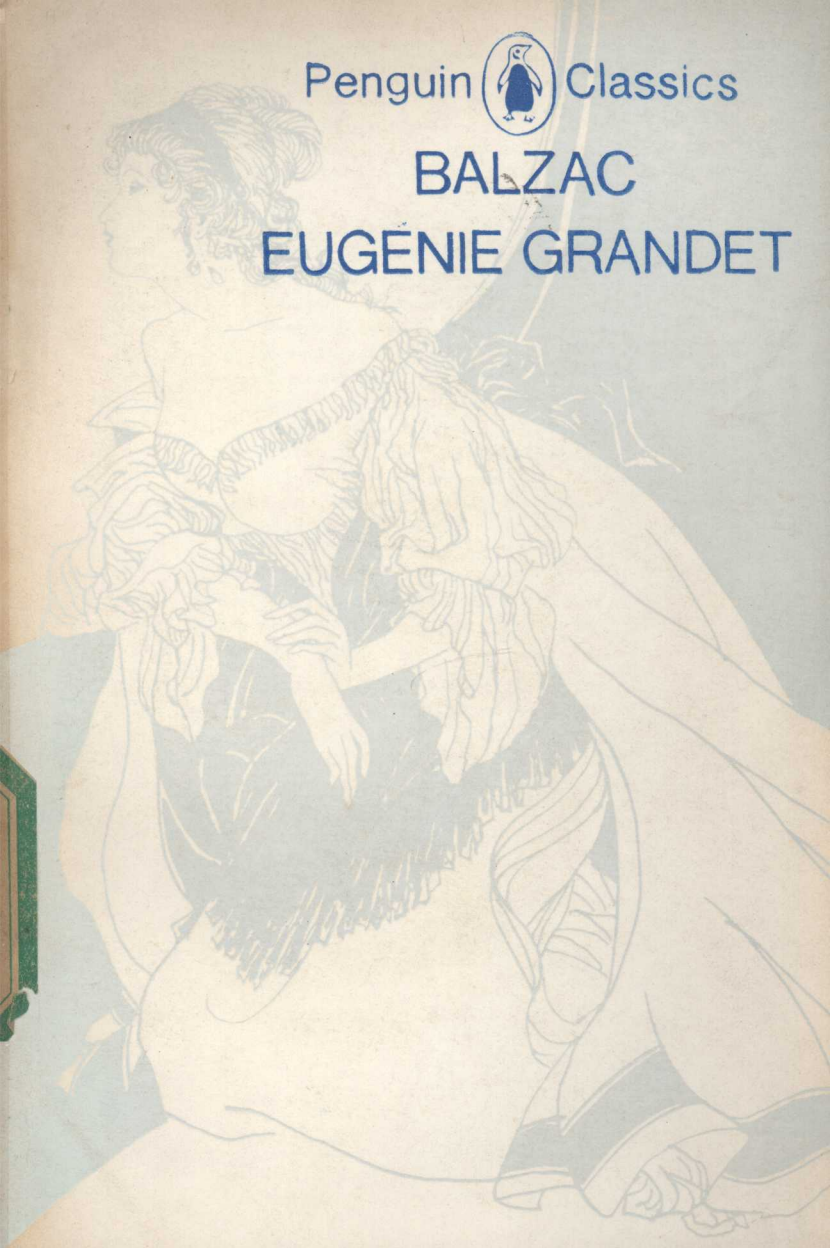
Penguin Classics

BALZAC
EUGÉNIE GRANDET



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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Honoré de Balzac was born at Tours in 1799, the son of a civil servant. He spent nearly six years as a boarder in a Vendôme school, then went to live in Paris, working as a lawyer's clerk then as a hack-writer. Between 1820 and 1824 he wrote a number of novels under various pseudonyms, many of them in collaboration, after which he unsuccessfully tried his luck at publishing, printing and type-founding. At the age of thirty, heavily in debt, he returned to literature with a dedicated fury and wrote the first novel to appear under his own name, *The Chouans*. During the next twenty years he wrote about ninety novels and shorter stories, among them many masterpieces, to which he gave the comprehensive title *The Human Comedy*. He died in 1850, a few months after his marriage to Evelina Hanska, the Polish countess with whom he had maintained amorous relations for eighteen years.

Marion Ayton Crawford, who died in 1973, taught English Language and Literature in the Technical College at Limavady, Northern Ireland. She translated five volumes of Balzac for the Penguin Classics: *Cousin Bette*, *Domestic Peace and Other Stories*, *The Chouans* and *Old Goriot*.

HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Eugénie Grandet

TRANSLATED BY
MARION AYTON CRAWFORD

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INTRODUCTION

WHEN Balzac as a young man of twenty was living and half-starving in a garret in Paris, given just sufficient time and money (two years and four francs a day), so his parents hoped, to prove that he could be as he asserted a literary man, or to cure him of the foolish fancy for ever and induce him to follow the lawyer's career which had been marked out for him, the work on which all his hopes and thoughts were fixed was a tragedy in the classical style, *Cromwell*. Posterity has endorsed the verdict passed on it by the professorial acquaintance of his brother-in-law's who was called on to consider it. He pronounced it to be completely lacking in any quality which might give hope of its success. But the play is important because of the models Balzac studied as he was writing it. He was trying with all his fabulous intellectual energy and powers of concentration to learn his chosen art, and his letters tell us of the passionate intensity of interest with which he was reading and analysing the works of the French classical theatre at that time. If Balzac had never read a play or seen one acted his strong dramatic sense would certainly still have found expression in the characters and scenes of his novels; and his romantic addiction to the sensational and the complex places him outside the main stream of the austere French tradition for both plays and novels. Yet it is possible to trace influences from, and affinities with, the plays he studied then, in his later novels; and of all the novels of the *Comédie humaine*, *Eugénie Grandet*, in 1883, one of the earliest, is generally considered the most classical.

All the characters of *Eugénie Grandet*, like the characters of 17th-century drama, and like so many of the characters of

Balzac's other novels, are drawn larger than life and appear simpler than real-life characters ever do, especially the character of Grandet, whose obsession dominates the book and gives rise to the tragedy. Balzac was intensely interested in psychological study, and his preoccupation with it is obvious in all his novels, but it is not the complexities and subtleties of men's minds, the discordant elements that fight for mastery in one human being, as the modern novelist sees them, that Balzac depicted. His characters are all of a piece, but represented with such power in their simplicity, or rather single-mindedness, that they become vehicles for the expression of universal truths, and the story of their lives has often an epic quality, or sometimes the direct working out of their apparently inevitable destiny seems to borrow from classical tragedy.

It is from comedy, however, that at first sight Grandet seems to have been taken. Balzac himself compared him to Molière's Harpagon. 'Molière created the miser, but I have created Avarice,' he remarked with his customary lack of proper modesty. In fact neither of the two characters is a mere abstraction, and of the two Balzac's is certainly the rounder figure, but their likeness is obvious. They are both studies in avarice, both broadly drawn with marked personal idiosyncrasies and tricks of speech which impose them on our minds. Both belong to the select band of the world's undying personalities. They are both seen by their creators in a blinding light which effaces all qualities but their dominant one, and illumines that one unforgettably.

The differences are clear enough too. Molière's purpose and the purpose of all those writers, like Jonson, who set living embodiments of human vices and follies in situations contrived to display them, was satirical, and the characters themselves do not alter in the course of the play. Balzac is only incidentally a satirist. He does not hate or despise his characters for their weakness or wickedness. He loves them, and

displays all their qualities, good or bad, with enjoyment. The extreme unlovableness of some of the characters whom Balzac managed to sympathize with and find pleasure in considering is notorious.

A more important difference is that Balzac's chief characters are capable of development, and visibly change under the impact of circumstances in the course of the novel, as people alter in real life. It is even possible to say that this development of the characters is one of the principal things the novels, and especially this novel, are 'about'. And yet all these characters in all the vicissitudes and changes through which they pass hold fast to their dominant idea, to the inner dream by which they live. In Grandet it is gold, in Madame Grandet God, in Eugénie her love of Charles. For Nanon it is devotion to her master, for Charles social position.

When the dominant idea amounts to an obsession as it does in Grandet, and indeed this is true also of all the characters who hold a fixed idea so strongly, development can only be in a straight line. We find Grandet a miser and watch him grow into a maniac, indifferent to the unhappiness of the daughter he once cared for, robbing her of her inheritance from her mother, grasping on his death-bed at the precious metal of a crucifix, ready to demand an account of his fortune from beyond the grave. In this Grandet is less like Harpagon than he is like Othello or Macbeth, both destroyed by a developing weakness in their own nature, and spreading destruction round them because of it, or like Racine's heroes and heroines, or like the characters of the Greek dramatists, pursued for their crimes by inescapable avenging Furies. In fact an English reader would more readily accept the particular truth to life that Grandet represents if he met him on the stage. He is the kind of dramatic character whom we expect to see reveal himself in a plot which achieves its climax and end within a few hours; but Balzac has, perfectly successfully, set him in an action lasting years.

Unlike the characters of the great tragic dramatists, Greek, French, English, Balzac's characters are not set apart from the mass of mankind by noble blood and high social position, but only by the intensity of their passion.

When, within three days, with the coming of New Year's Day 1819, Grandet was bound to discover that Eugénie's gold coins were gone, Balzac says, 'In three days a terrible drama would begin, a bourgeois tragedy undignified by poison, dagger or bloodshed, but to the protagonists more cruel than any of the tragedies endured by the members of the noble house of Atreus.' Such a comparison is characteristic of him, not only because he loved allusions to classical literature, but because he was very consciously the first novelist to show that bourgeois tragedies *were* tragic, as tragic as any drama of classical tragedy to those concerned, and having a comparably destructive effect upon the fabric of society. The comparison too serves to heighten the tension and prepare for the dramatic scene which is to come. It is not less characteristic of Balzac that immediately after making this comparison he should note that Madame Grandet had not completed the woollen sleeves she was knitting, and that for want of them she caught a chill. He is never afraid of bathos.

In spite of the way in which Grandet's figure bestrides it like a colossus the novel is called not *Old Grandet* but *Eugénie Grandet*, and the greater and psychologically more interesting tragedy is hers. It is a tragedy of the development of her immature character under the pressure of passion, which immediately brings her into collision with her father's passion and later with a similar passion which has developed in Charles.

In this novel, perhaps more urgently than in any of the others, we are driven to ask ourselves what Balzac meant by Fate, and to what extent he sees the tragedy in his characters' lives as preordained. There is no simple answer to that question. Perhaps consideration of other aspects of the book may shed some

light on it. It is worth noting here, however, that the plot follows the rule for French classical tragedy: the incidents are determined solely by the characters of the actors, and are linked together in a solid chain of causal sequence. Balzac goes to great pains to establish each link in the chain of cause and effect. For example, even the apparent accident that Charles Grandet fails to realize that his uncle is a wealthy man is shown in a perfectly natural conversation between Charles and Eugénie to be an inevitable consequence not only of Grandet's mode of life, but of the ignorance of his affairs in which he had kept his daughter. The psychological development of each character, too, is made absolutely clear.

Balzac was writing the story of his own times in all his novels, and although *Eugénie Grandet* was written in 1833, before he had consciously conceived the idea of linking all the novels together, and although the few main characters are living quiet lives, buried in the depths of a narrow provincial town, he never lets us forget that they are living in the post-Revolutionary age, and in fact he is writing about them partly in order to show the working of the ideas and forces of that age.

Avarice is a vice we have always had with us, but the word had a new meaning in Balzac's time when, with the restraining force of the Church and a rigid social order gone, dazzling dreams of power strongly reinforced the natural hoarding instincts of the peasant, dreams which, with Napoleon's example before his eyes, he had every hope of realizing. Balzac notes, and does not think it fantastic, that Grandet, a former cooper, if his ambitions had been aimed higher, might have been a delegate to the congresses that decide international affairs and served France well, although he concludes by reflecting that it is probably only in his own environment that Grandet can exert his genius.

Intrigue, once confined to the Court at Versailles, had become widespread throughout the country, since almost anyone

could aspire to any position, provided he had money and could get to know the right people. Everyone was greedy to grab power, and money meant power. Money in the early 19th century had become in a greater degree than ever before something achievable by the use of men's brains in being more ready than their neighbours to see and seize the new opportunities thrown in their way. Finance was beginning to assume the part it plays in the modern world. Society was taking on the fiercely competitive aspect that is a feature of modern life. Modern scientific theory was beginning to reveal to man his place in the world as but one of the higher animals who had reached his position of supremacy by the use of superior weapons in the general fight for survival. Balzac, chronicling in the *Comédie humaine* this society in eruption, was the first to study many aspects of the modern world.

The struggle to amass money and to achieve power is notoriously a grand theme of the *Comédie humaine*. The books are packed with ambitious men and adventurers, careerists and speculators, bankers, financiers, and misers of every conceivable kind, and many that would be inconceivable if he had not made living human beings of them. His success in portraying modern types of unscrupulous rascal led to his being accused of bringing them into being, nature imitating art; and the enormous popularity of his novels, which set unprincipled people in the limelight and gave them a certain prestige, has been blamed for the cynical outlook of the modern Frenchman, and the mania for social climbing and fortune-hunting which he was the first to record.

Balzac always declares his moral aim: he is concerned to show what damage these people do to themselves, to the State and to the fabric of society, but generally he enjoys himself so much, has so much sympathy with powerful and ambitious men, relates the doings of his villains with such gusto, that his moral aims are inclined to be overlooked by his readers. Money-making is a sordid business, and he spares us no detail

of the sordidness and the callousness it engenders in human beings, but to him all the modern ways of building up a fortune were just as romantic (and ruthlessness was an element in the romance) as Charles Grandet's adventures half across the world in search of gold. It was in no spirit of cold scientific investigation, as a modern social inquirer might fill his notebooks and set down the result of his survey, that Balzac carried out his avowed purpose of documenting his age: the power of money and men's struggles in pursuit of it set his brain on fire. And to his misers, almost symbolic figures, gold has the magic, the romantic fascination which its name alone, its yellow glitter, held for the Conquistadores, and its devotees are known to one another by signs that betray their passion, and the cold metallic glitter of their eyes.

The tides that are sweeping France send their wash into the remote provincial town of Saumur. We watch the forces and passions that are changing the entire social scene in action in this backwater.

The foundation of Grandet's fortune was laid by the breaking up of the aristocratic estates and the expropriation of land after the Revolution. He increases it by selling wine to the Republican armies, and he ends by learning and putting into practice the lesson, strange and new to a country cooper, that money invested breeds money, and that this return is not dependent on the vagaries of the weather, like the crops grown on his land. His wife's grandfather and his own grandmother had been misers too, and they had kept their money in their stockings, thinking that money invested was money thrown away, since they were not free to handle and gloat over the stuff, but Grandet, while sharing their passion, is a man of the new age.

Gold, the actual precious metal, is constantly present before our mind's eye as we read *Eugénie Grandet*, piled up and gloated over in Grandet's strongroom, or taken at dead of night to Nantes to be sold in secret, part of Charles Grandet's equipment

as a young exquisite in jewellery and toilet fittings, in Eugénie's store of beautiful coins whose names are an incantation which Grandet loves to recite, evoking for the reader the atmosphere of times when all trade was a glorious adventure, money was beautiful, and money transactions romantic. This is the 19th century, but the spacious piratical days of the 18th are not yet only a memory. These are still the days when a young man can set out for the East Indies with the scantiest of capital and return in a few years with a fortune, acquired with cold-blooded ruthlessness in the course of a highly romantic and adventurous life. It is entirely in keeping that Charles should bring his fortune home in the form of gold dust 'packed in three casks strongly bound with iron'. It strikes a more modern note that he should hope to do a profitable deal in the gold, and use the proceeds, by way of a successful marriage, by intrigue and knowing the right people, to rise to one or other of the highest positions in the state.

The love of money and passionate pursuit of it, studied in detail in the person of Grandet, are seen also in this book as a dynamic force in society, driving other characters and groups of characters, the Cruchots and des Grassins in Saumur, the whole business world and the world of fashion in Paris, as well as Charles Grandet.

Grandet's lonely wife and daughter in their gloomy home are isolated still further by the web of intrigue that surrounds them, woven by the rival parties who with their allies and plans of campaign are all busily working for the prize of the hand of the rich heiress, and the next step in first social, and then political, advancement. When Monsieur de Bonfons is in the end victorious, his rise is rapid. Charles Grandet, when he at last learns how rich is the prize he has thrown away, is quick to master his shock, and ready at once to try to take advantage of his acquaintance with the future husband of his wealthy cousin. 'We shall be able to push each other on in the

world,' he says. De Bonfons rises to the top of his profession, and he is only waiting for a general election to make him a deputy, when death snatches him from his prizes. No sooner is de Bonfons out of the way than a new campaign is started: it is the Froidfond family this time whose nets are spread for the heiress. At the end of the novel we are told, and it is a large part of her tragedy, that Eugénie was fated to find that others approached her only with self-interested motives, that the pale cold glitter of gold was destined to take the place of all warmth and colour in her life. To the acquaintances who came to her drawing-room to play cards and to flatter her she was not a human being at all, but a figure set on a pedestal made of money-bags. Early in the book Balzac speaks of 'the only god that anyone believes in nowadays – Money, in all its power', and from one point of view the novel might almost be taken as a sermon on that text. It is dominated by the pale cold glitter of gold. Only simple people like Nanon and her husband who are not awake to what is going on in the world can be sincere in their affections.

The drama enacted in Grandet's house takes place, as it were, on a remote island surrounded by stormy seas. The Grandets are cut off, not only by the fact that they have no real friends among the Cruchot and des Grassins factions, but by Grandet's ceaseless intrigues to get the better of his neighbours and the fear and awe he is held in locally, with reason. The sharp eyes and busy tongues in Saumur that incessantly watch and comment form an isolating ring of gossip. Yet we are not allowed to forget that all these onlookers have busy lives of their own in which gossip and speculation, for example on Eugénie's possible husband, are only an ingredient, and what really matters is the price paid for the vintage. There are hints too that stories as dramatic and tragic as Eugénie Grandet's might be revealed if we watched other people as closely as we watch the Grandets. When Madame des Grassins invites Charles to dinner she says she will ask the du Hautoys and

their lovely daughter, and remarks that she hopes the girl will be presentably dressed for once, as her mother is jealous of her and turns her out badly. It is just a casual remark, revelatory of Madame des Grassins' catty nature, but it gives a sudden glimpse of what could be another Balzacian tragedy, a sense of human passions and human frustrations that can be guessed at, and are only one instance of many that we know nothing of. Madame des Grassins' own life is a tragedy too, sketched in without emphasis or underlining in her various appearances in the Grandet drawing-room.

In Paris the business world and the world of fashion go busily about their own concerns, and we are kept aware of them through the coming and going of Charles and des Grassins and later de Bonfons, and through the letters that pass between Paris and Saumur, from Charles's father, from Charles to his friend and his mistress, from des Grassins to Grandet, from Charles in Paris to Eugénie, and finally from des Grassins to his wife about his interview with Charles.

This wealth of lives lived in various places and social groups, with the complexity of the way in which they meet and touch each other, is one of the things that make us ready to accept the suggestion that the *Comédie humaine* is in fact a chronicle of the actual world as it existed.

We are made aware of the many generations of forbears of Balzac's characters. The old houses of Saumur are part of the history of France, not because the town played any very striking or distinguished part in history, but because for hundreds of years the citizens in the houses, by merely living and sharing in the passions of their day, writing on the walls slogans that mean nothing to anyone now, subjecting strangers to a running fire of gibes as they passed down the streets, developing their own idiosyncrasies and twists of character, have impressed their stamp upon the houses they built and lived in, which in turn mould and influence their descendants who live there. When Eugénie's sensibility is quickened by

her love for Charles, and the shock of hearing that her father would rather see her dead than married to him, she becomes aware of the heavy time-laden atmosphere of the ancient street. This is only one occasion of many when the reader is reminded of it, and of the curious eyes of the present inhabitants that peer from the houses.

The characters are set in families, very conscious of family ties, counting on fortunes to be inherited, surrounded by heirlooms valuable or tawdry, an old Sèvres sugar-bowl or a red plush purse, with portraits of grandparents and great-aunts hanging on the walls.

The influence of heredity has its part to play in their development, as it had in the development of Racine's tragic heroes and heroines, and the reappearance of family characteristics is pointed out to us, when the latent weaknesses of his Grandet blood show themselves at last in Charles, and Eugénie in a phrase recalls her father's method of dealing with a situation. The characters are rooted in the past.

In Scott's novels Balzac had studied life as exhibiting man's relation to his historic past, but he goes very much further than Scott did in the degree to which he made the past condition the present.

Since in reading the novel we feel that we already know everything material concerning the past of the Grandet family, it seems superfluous to find a possible ancestry for it in real life. It has been noted, however, that in Saumur Balzac must have heard talk of a certain Jean Nivelleau, a miser and money-lender in the town, of humble origin, who having built up a fortune had bought a fine estate just outside Saumur, and married his beautiful daughter to the Baron de Grandmaison, a former officer of Charles X's life-guards. Their grand-nephew and heir, Georges de Grandmaison, declared that Balzac wrote *Eugénie Grandet* in revenge for Nivelleau's refusal of him as a son-in-law. However that may be, and we have to note too that the dedication of the book

does more than hint that Eugénie is studied from life, from the mysterious Maria about whom nothing factual is known, though Grandet's story may be founded on fact, as they say, the words seem ridiculous as we say them because Grandet's story *is* fact, a different sort of fact, and Grandet is not Jean Nivelleau. How could he be when the factors that have made him what he is include, as well as the generations of his ancestors and the buildings and furniture he has lived in and surrounded himself with, the shape of his head, the length of his nose and the wen on it, and even his name, as Balzac believed?

In the same way it is hardly of the first importance that, though the old Saumur which Balzac describes has partly disappeared, the vestiges remaining are said to bear witness to Balzac's exactness. Archaeological correctness, though he insisted that that was what he was giving us, and though it makes his books fascinating and sometimes wearisome storehouses of historical information, matters as little in Balzac's novels as it does in Dickens's. Dickens's London and Balzac's Paris and his country towns have their own kind of authenticity. They are alive like the characters with the essential vitality given them in the first place by the novelist's creative imagination, and are recreated ever afterwards by every reader in his own mind. It is in trying to achieve this sort of authenticity that films fall down so badly, because studio reconstructions, or even photographs taken 'on location', have so little power, compared with a novelist's vision, to set the imagination to work. At first sight some of Balzac's plots and many of his characters look like a godsend to the film industry, but films could do nothing but leave out a great deal that is vital to Balzac. They can photograph characters against a background exactly as Balzac described them: it is more difficult to convey the relationship between them, a product often not of years but of generations of life in the same place.

The ancient main street of Saumur leading to the marketplace and Grandet's fields by the Loire form the wider setting