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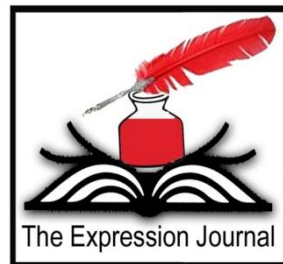
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THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPROMISING ONE'S VALUES: AN EXAMINATION OF RASTIGNAC'S JOURNEY IN *PÈRE GORIOT*

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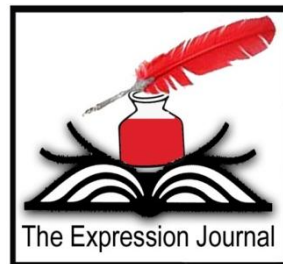
Abstract

Honoré de Balzac's novel, "Le Père Goriot," is a poignant commentary on the social and economic conditions in France during the early 19th century. The story revolves around a group of characters residing in a boarding house in Paris, with a particular focus on the old and impoverished Goriot and the ambitious student Eugène de Rastignac. Through the characterizations and interactions of these individuals, Balzac presents a scathing critique of the corruption, greed, and hypocrisy that he saw as endemic to French society. One of the novel's key themes is the corrupting influence of ambition and the pursuit of wealth and status. Balzac portrays Rastignac's gradual transformation from a naive and idealistic young man into a jaded and cynical social climber who is willing to betray his morals and values to achieve success. The character of Vautrin represents the dark side of ambition, and his influence ultimately leads Rastignac down a dangerous path. Another prominent theme in the novel is the complex relationship between parents and children. Goriot's unconditional love for his two daughters, who treat him with callous indifference, highlights the tragedy of familial bonds broken by mercantilist interests. The contrast between Goriot's devotion to his children and the cold, calculating nature of the other characters underscores the novel's critique of the moral decay of French society. Furthermore, Balzac's portrayal of women in "Le Père Goriot" is noteworthy for its complexity and nuance. The female characters in the novel, particularly Goriot's daughters, are shown as both victims and perpetrators of the societal corruption that Balzac critiques. They are subject to the same forces of greed, ambition, and social climbing as the male characters, but are also constrained by the limited options available to women in a patriarchal society. Balzac's depiction of their struggles and sacrifices adds a layer of depth and pathos to the novel.

Keywords

Realism, Parisian Society, Disenchantment, Power, Human Nature, Corruption.

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Honore de Balzac's novel *Old Man Goriot*, published in 1835, is set in Restoration Paris during the period of nascent capitalism where money is becoming quintessential. In *The Human Comedy*, his "grand and extraordinary enterprise," of which *Old Man Goriot* was the first "big test," Balzac sets out to delineate modern society and its vicissitudes. The power of aristocracy was being debilitated by the rising commercial classes. "Class and money were considered crucial issues in Post-Revolutionary France." (Unwin, 42) Subsequently, Balzac emphasizes the "omnipotence, omniscience and universal applicability of money" in *The House of Nucingen*. With the advent of capitalism, there is a rise in mass consumption, and suddenly, prominence is given to bibelots. Balzac himself had been perpetually in debt because of his "insatiable appetite for material goods." There is a burgeoning of material culture in the nineteenth century, precipitating a disintegration of society where people begin to be driven by mercenary motives, and relationships are used unscrupulously for financial success.

The eponymous novel depicts the story of Goriot who amasses his fortune by speculation, exploiting the trepidant atmosphere caused by the Revolution, and sells his pasta flour at exorbitant prices. Just as he was elevated by the Revolution, Goriot was disparaged by the Restoration. His daughters extort money from him, and after some time, cease to welcome him in their "respectable" houses, and he is sequestered out by society. *Old Man Goriot* addresses the problems governing the fallacious Parisian society and its misplaced emphasis on possession, status, and class. Balzac makes the fashionable society the central social unit and uses this community as the vantage point from which to deliver a blistering critique. Through the figure of Vautrin, a perspicacious character in the novel, who "revelled in scoffing at the law, lashing out at high society, exposing its fecklessness" (15), Balzac succeeds in attacking the mores of the Parisian society and uncovers the sordid realities behind the decorous appearances of high life.

In the excerpt, flaneur is a class activity. The escapades of a man in a carriage masquerading as upright are overlooked. The theme of affectation reverberates throughout the novel. As Vautrin remarks, "you either have to be rich to start with or appear to be so." This

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subterfuge is necessary to succeed in society. "In Paris, success is everything, it's the key to power," where not even two steps can be taken without coming across all kinds of machinations. Vautrin enlightens Rastignac that "the secret of vast fortune with no apparent cause is a crime that has been long forgotten because it was committed cleanly." This impunity exposes the hypocrisy of Parisian society, wherein disadvantaged or impoverished people are conjectured as "rogues." Even though Nucingen, a wealthy man in the novel, indulges in nefarious activities and also seizes hold of his wife's fortunes, he remains guileless to society while Goriot is deemed ignominious and endures pejorative insults from all the people around him.

Vautrin exploits other people's vices and tries to manoeuvre the loopholes of the law to his advantage, yet he can engage the reader's sympathy. Balzac is more interested in Vautrin as a critic of society as he shares his view that bankers like Nucingen did more harm than by thieves and murderers. Vautrin reveals the subjectivities of virtue. A man climbs the social ladder through the "brilliance of his genius or skill of his corruption," and "honesty will get you nowhere." Vautrin's vituperations about Paris to Rastignac are efficacious and lead to his gradual disenchantment with the beau monde. He "recognized the world for what it is - a place where laws and morality are often disregarded, where social climbing and personal gain are prioritized over principles and human values." This realization ultimately leads Rastignac to make some tough decisions and choose his path in life, rather than blindly following societal norms and expectations.

Vautrin's influence on Rastignac is significant, as he catalyses the young man's transformation. By exposing him to the darker side of Parisian society and challenging his preconceived notions, Vautrin forces Rastignac to confront the harsh realities of the world and question his values and beliefs.

Overall, Vautrin's vituperations can be seen as a cautionary tale where the subjectivities of virtue are revealed, warning readers about the dangers of ambition and the corrupting influence of society. It encourages individuals to stay true to their principles and to resist the allure of power and wealth at any cost.

The decadence of the age is inextricably linked to the deterioration of the pillars of society, the church, state and family. "Rapacious individuals unchecked by religion and monarchy thrive" (Robb, 20). The squalor of the city reflects the moral turpitudes of its inhabitants. Ferragus remarks about the appearance of people in Paris as "less faces than masks, masks of hypocrisy...almost infernal in hue for it is not for nothing that Paris has been called a hell."

The boarding house is a microcosm of the Parisian life. They embody the ubiquitous culture of hypocrisy and rapacity. Even Madame Vauquer judges people according to their purse and treats them according to their income...believes the decline of her boarding house is a greater tragedy than the demise of old Goriot" (Graham Robb, 21)

Goriot's rhapsody over his daughters can also be viewed as "unnatural." His profound love for his daughters does not come across as altogether untainted by solipsism. "I want my daughter. I made them! they are mine" (242) Beizer expatiates how Goriot, like a hidden god wants to append Rastignac to his daughter's life and so revise her story." Rastignac is to be appropriated as a son ideally destined to fulfil Goriot's paternity and to rectify his daughter's failure to do so." (Beizer, 357) Literary critic Harold Bloom has noted that the novel "conveys an acute sense of the darkening of French society during the Restoration," and that Balzac's portrayal of Goriot's daughters as selfish and indifferent to their father's suffering is "one of the

most powerful examples of filial ingratitude in literature. It highlights the tragic nature of familial bonds broken by mercantilist interests. The contrast between Goriot's unconditional love for his daughters and their callous indifference towards him adds a layer of pathos to the novel and underscores the critique of the moral decay of French society. Bloom's analysis of "Le Père Goriot" emphasizes the novel's powerful social critique and its ability to capture the contradictions and complexities of a rapidly changing society. The novel's portrayal of ambition, greed, and corruption as corrupting influences on human relationships and society continues to resonate with readers today.

Rastignac sets himself the task of appropriating the advantages of his youth and aristocratic connections in the form of social power, wealth, and privileged access to women, yet he considers himself righteous. When Delphine puts on a performance to pique his sympathy and appeals to his virtue, he goes to gamble. Catherine Savage opines that "Rastignac is akin to Julien Sorel: the young, ambitious, individualistic provincial who yearns for success and who is ready to fight his personal Napoleonic battles in Paris in order to impose himself". He is capable of cynicism. After Vautrin's disquisitions, Barberis explicates how "Rastignac is going to be a double. There will be a Rastignac who reimburses his sisters and takes care of Goriot; there will be a Rastignac who goes to salons and becomes Delphine de Nucingen's lover." Despite all his knowledge and clarity of vision that enables him to see through the superficiality, he does not withdraw from the society. "his eyes came to rest almost greedily on ...the home of the beau monde which he had been so determined to enter" (256).

Through its nuanced characterizations, evocative descriptions of Parisian life, and sharp social commentary, the novel exposes the dark underbelly of a society obsessed with wealth, status, and power. Balzac adumbrates the foibles and hypocrisies prevalent in the Parisian society wherein a veneer of virtue is sufficient for higher echelons of society to thrive but "if you're a better man, walk on the straight path with your head held high ... you'll have to fight envy, slander, mediocrity, the whole world." (99).

Balzac's "Le Père Goriot" is also notable for its vivid and detailed depiction of Parisian society during the era of the Bourbon Restoration. The novel portrays a city undergoing rapid change and transformation, as the old aristocracy struggles to maintain its power and influence in the face of a rising bourgeois class. Balzac's descriptions of the boarding house and its inhabitants offer a fascinating glimpse into the daily lives, customs, and attitudes of a range of social classes, from the desperate poverty of Goriot to the glamorous excesses of the high society parties attended by Rastignac. "Le Père Goriot" is a powerful indictment of the corruption and moral decay of early 19th-century France. Through its characters and scathing social commentary, the novel critiques the corrosive effects of greed and ambition on human relationships and society. Ultimately, "Le Père Goriot" is a masterful work of realist fiction that captures the contradictions and complexities of a rapidly changing society. Balzac's acute observations of human behavior, his sharp social commentary, and his evocative descriptions of Parisian life and culture make the novel a compelling and enduring masterpiece of French literature.

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