Père Goriot

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HONORÉ DE BALZAC

Honoré Balzac was the second of five children born into a socially ascendant French family. As a child, Balzac spent most of his time being cared for by a nurse or attending boarding school; his parents showed little warmth toward him or his siblings. As a teenager, he continued his education in Paris, studying law at the Sorbonne. In fact, in 1819 (when *Père Goriot* is set), Balzac was a poor law student in his early twenties, just like his eventual character Eugène de Rastignac. By the time Balzac completed his legal training, he decided to become a writer instead. However, it wasn't until 1829 that he published his first novel, *Le Dernier Chouan*. After the publication of a short story collection in 1830, his popularity in Paris's literary circles began to grow. Balzac was known for his remarkable work ethic, often staying up all night engaging in coffee-fueled writing sessions. Many of his novels and stories were collected in the 17 volumes known as *La Comédie humaine*, intended to offer a panoramic view of French society. Because of his attention to detail and his well-rounded characters, Balzac is regarded as a founding figure in literary realism. In 1850, Balzac married a Polish countess named Madame Eveline Hanska, with whom he had corresponded for almost 20 years. Months later, he died in Paris.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Père Goriot is set during the Bourbon Restoration, which is dated between the fall of Napoleon in 1814 and the popular uprisings of the July Revolution in 1830. During this period reigned Louis XVIII and Charles X, both brothers of Louis XVI (who'd been executed during the French Revolution in 1793). These kings instituted a constitutional monarchy which, unlike its absolutist pre-Revolutionary counterpart, incorporated some checks on the monarch's power. Otherwise, the monarchy retained some of the Revolution's changes, such as the central role of Paris in French governance and culture, which is reflected in the novel. Another aspect of the Bourbon Restoration which the novel reflects is the prominence of a new aristocracy which arose after the Revolution. Tensions grew between the new aristocracy and the emerging middle class. While many Parisians remained entrenched in poverty, some from the middle classes—like the character of Rastignac in *Père Goriot*—could attempt to adapt to aristocratic norms and climb to a higher social standing. *Père Goriot* is considered to be Balzac's most important novel, and it falls within the *Scènes de la vie privée* section of his multi-volume *La Comédie humaine*, which consists of 91 short stories, novels, and essays, all organized into different aspects of French life in the early 19th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Balzac was influenced by Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott, author of such works as *Ivanhoe*, to incorporate realistic historical details into his fiction. The father-daughter strife of *Père Goriot* has also been likened to the plot of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and the story of Vautrin's temptation of Rastignac invites comparison to Goethe's *Faust*. Of the many novels that make up Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, one of the most critically acclaimed is *Eugénie Grandet*, which in turn influenced *Washington Square* by Balzac's protégé, Henry James.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Père Goriot
- **When Written:** 1834
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** Serialized in *Revue de Paris* in 1834; published as a book in 1835
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Paris, France; November 1819–February 1820
- **Climax:** Goriot's death
- **Antagonist:** Vautrin
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Rastignac Recurs. Recurring characters are a notable feature of Balzac's fiction. Many characters in *Père Goriot* appear in other Balzac novels, especially Rastignac, whose social climbing is traced in other works in *La Comédie humaine*, such as *La Maison Nucingen*.

Criminal Minds. The famous criminal Eugène-François Vidocq (whose background was mostly in petty theft; he later reformed and became a detective) inspired Balzac to create the character of Vautrin. Balzac was interested in people who led lives of crime, and in 1834, the same year he wrote *Père Goriot*, he met Vidocq personally.

PLOT SUMMARY

For 30 years, a widow named Madame Vauquer has run a shabby yet respectable boarding house in an obscure,

downscale Paris neighborhood. In the winter of 1819, seven boarders are living there. These include an idealistic young law student named Eugène de Rastignac; a shrunken, elderly pair named Mademoiselle Michonneau and Monsieur Poiret; a disowned young woman named Victorine Taillefer and her guardian, Madame Couture; a mysterious but cheerful man of 40 named Vautrin; and a retired pasta-maker who goes by Père Goriot. Everyone gives Goriot a hard time. He had a successful career, but his fortune shrinks, and his appearance declines within his first couple of years in the Maison Vauquer. When they notice fashionable young women visiting Goriot, the others assume that he's a rascal who's squandered his fortune on mistresses.

Rastignac wants to launch a successful law career in order to support his large family, whose estate in the provinces is struggling. He knows that, in addition to his law studies, he must carve a place for himself within Paris society. Accordingly, his aunt arranges an introduction for him with a rich distant cousin named Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant. While at the vicomtesse's ball, Rastignac is drawn to an attractive young woman named Madame Anastasie de Restaud and gets permission to call on her. When Rastignac visits Madame de Restaud, he sees his neighbor Goriot just leaving. But when he mentions "Père Goriot" in the course of an already awkward visit, Rastignac commits an inexplicable offense and leaves in embarrassment.

Discouraged, Rastignac goes to visit Madame de Beauséant and begs for her help in navigating Paris's bafflingly complex social world. His cousin explains that Madame de Restaud is Goriot's daughter and that she, along with her sister Madame Delphine de Nucingen, are forbidden by their husbands to see him. Goriot spent his entire fortune ensuring that his daughters could make wealthy, socially advantageous marriages. Afterward, however, his daughters began to see Goriot as a social embarrassment, only visiting him in secret when they need financial help. Madame de Beauséant also advises Rastignac that if he really wants to succeed in society, he must attach himself to a rich young woman but never reveal any genuine emotions; people must be viewed as objects to be used and then abandoned. Delphine de Nucingen is a good candidate because of her desperation for social acceptance. If Rastignac introduces her to Madame de Beauséant, he'll be favored by Delphine and thus by society at large.

Back at the boarding house, Rastignac's neighbor Vautrin takes him aside and offers him advice, too. He explains that there are only two choices in life: obedience to society's ways or revolt. He tells Rastignac that pursuing a career and marriage the conventional way will take decades. If Rastignac really wants to succeed, he should get there the way most people in Paris do: through corruption. He offers to get Rastignac a rich wife in exchange for a portion of the dowry as a commission. He points out that Victorine is in love with Rastignac, and that if her brother were killed off, she would gain a huge inheritance. Vautrin can arrange this. He argues that this approach isn't morally inferior to the subtler compromises Rastignac will inevitably make as a conventional lawyer. But Rastignac, horrified, rejects the offer.

Later, Rastignac goes to the theater with Madame de Beauséant, and he's introduced to Madame de Nucingen for the first time. He quickly becomes infatuated with her. He also befriends Goriot, who's hungry for any news of his neglectful daughters, whom he nevertheless adores from afar. Before long, Rastignac begins receiving invitations to spend time with Delphine de Nucingen. She even uses Rastignac to help her out of financial difficulties—much as she uses her father—by making him win money for her through gambling. She admits to him that most Parisian women, despite outward appearances, are constantly strapped for cash and make all sorts of moral compromises as a result. Despite knowing this, Rastignac gets drawn into Delphine's luxurious lifestyle more and more, running out of money for basic expenses and neglecting his studies. He also begins to develop genuine feelings for her, though he'd never intended to. Though he continues to find Vautrin's offer repugnant, he also can't help flirting with Victorine in his desperation.

Meanwhile, the inconspicuous elderly boarders, Poiret and Mademoiselle Michonneau, are approached by a detective named Monsieur Gondureau, who tells them that Vautrin is actually a criminal mastermind and escaped convict named Jacques Collin, or "Death-Dodger." He offers a substantial reward in exchange for their cooperation in drugging Vautrin in order to confirm his identity. As this plot is underway, Vautrin puts his own plan in motion, instigating a duel that will lead to the death of Victorine's brother. Rastignac resolves to warn Victorine's family that night. However, Vautrin suspects his intentions and drugs Rastignac's wine so that he falls asleep, missing his chance.

The next morning, Mademoiselle Michonneau drugs Vautrin's coffee shortly before the boarding house residents learn, to their horror, that Victorine's brother has been fatally wounded in the duel. After Vautrin drinks his coffee and collapses, Mademoiselle Michonneau and Poirot locate the criminal's brand on his shoulder, confirming his identity as Death-dodger and tipping off Gondureau's police force. To the other residents' shock, Vautrin is arrested that night. Rastignac, shaken by these events, takes comfort in the newly furnished apartment that Delphine and Goriot have provided for him as a surprise. He also secures an invitation to Madame de Beauséant's upcoming ball for Delphine and promises Goriot a room above his new apartment, allowing him to be close to one of his daughters at last. It seems as if everyone will get what they've desired and that things will resolve happily.

While Rastignac and Goriot are preparing to move out of the boarding house, however, Delphine comes to visit Goriot,

complaining of financial ruin—her husband is blackmailing her because of her relationship with Rastignac. Anastasie shows up soon afterward, in trouble because she's pawned the de Restaud diamonds to cover her lover, Maxime's, massive gambling debts. As the sisters squabble, Goriot realizes that they're both unhappy and that he's powerless to fix it; his health begins to collapse. Between the two of them, Rastignac and Goriot spend their last resources to get the sisters out of their difficulties, but by the following night, Goriot has taken to his bed for the last time.

That night, at Madame de Beauséant's ball, Rastignac tries to convince Delphine to visit her dying father, but she refuses to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. Meanwhile, Madame de Beauséant, humiliated by her lover's impending marriage (which she'd been in denial about until the day of the ball), decides to leave Paris society altogether and retire to the countryside with her emotional integrity intact. Rastignac bids his cousin a fond goodbye.

The next day, Goriot begins fading rapidly. Rastignac and his friend Bianchon, a good-hearted medical student, take turns nursing the old man. Rastignac begs both Delphine and Anastasie to visit Goriot before it's too late, but they both offer excuses, confirming that they don't truly love him. In his final struggle, Goriot laments his daughters' unfaithfulness, seeming to finally recognize his relationships with them for what they are. However, he dies clutching Rastignac and Bianchon, mistaking them for his daughters, deluded to the last.

Rastignac and Bianchon spend their last francs to ensure a decent burial for Goriot; Goriot's daughters and sons-in-law offer no help, and they only send their servants to the funeral. After the service, Rastignac walks to the hilltop in the cemetery and overlooks Paris. He recognizes the city's falsity and corruption, yet at the same time, he's hungry for the superficial pleasures it has to offer. He then heads off to dine with Delphine, suggesting that he will continue fighting to balance social success with moral integrity.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Père Goriot – Jean-Joachim Goriot is an elderly, retired pasta-maker who lives in the Masion Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. He's Anastasie and Delphine's father. Goriot was very successful in his trade, especially during the French Revolution, when he made a small fortune; he can determine the type and quality of flour just by sniffing a piece of bread. At the beginning of the novel, most people in the Maison Vauquer make fun of him. Madame Vauquer once daydreamed about becoming Goriot's wife, believing him to be rich—but when her hopes are rebuffed and Goriot's fortunes seem to dwindle (he moves into successively smaller apartments and mysteriously sells most of his possessions), she provokes the other boarders into mocking him. When fashionable young women begin visiting Goriot, everyone assumes that he's an incorrigible rascal who has squandered his fortune on mistresses. However, these are actually his beloved daughters. Goriot, a longtime widow, is obsessed with his daughters and has always stopped at nothing to ensure their happiness. In fact, his adoration of his children is just about his only distinguishing characteristic. However, his sons-in-law disdain him and refuse to let his daughters see him. They, in turn, only see Goriot when they need money. Goriot accepts this humiliation for the sake of seeing the girls and believing that they're happy, equating his own happiness and comfort with theirs. He finds a friend in Rastignac, assisting the young man in getting to know Delphine and enjoying more opportunities to see her in exchange. He refuses to see the true nature of this one-sided relationship until he is on his deathbed—and even then, after both daughters fail to visit him, he's unable to fully accept it.

Eugène de Rastignac – Rastignac is a naïve, idealistic 22-year-old law student who lives in the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. Rastignac's parents, aunt, two brothers (Henri and Gabriel), and two sisters (Laure and Agathe) live on a provincial wine estate, getting by on a small income. Rastignac has come to Paris in search of a profitable career in hopes of supporting his family. However, he's just as eager to find a place for himself in Paris's social scene. After he commits a *faux pas* during an attempt to win the heart of Madame de Restaud, he turns to his distant cousin, Madame de Beauséant, to be a "fairy godmother" and teach him how to succeed in Parisian society. On her advice, Rastignac begins pursuing Madame de Restaud's sister, Madame Delphine de Nucingen, instead. He soon becomes genuinely infatuated with her. Though Vautrin offers Rastignac a shortcut to social success (which involves killing off fellow boarder Victorine's brother so that she will be rich, allowing her to marry Rastignac), Rastignac never fully reconciles himself to this option. He is tempted, however, after he becomes immersed in Delphine's dissipated lifestyle and begins running up huge debts. The more Rastignac experiences Parisian luxury, such as the apartment Delphine fixes up for him, the harder it is for him to imagine returning to a quiet provincial life. Through his obsession with Delphine, Rastignac also becomes friends with her father, Goriot, and genuinely cares for the old man; he is one of the only people at Goriot's deathbed and funeral. In fact, Rastignac's respect for Goriot seems to be one of the only things that prevents Rastignac from following Vautrin's amoral path to success. At the end of the novel, Rastignac is disgusted with Paris's corrupt, status-driven society, yet he appears to reconcile himself to a lifelong struggle with it, continuing his relationship with Delphine.

Vautrin – Vautrin is a 40-year-old resident at the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. Unknown to

most other characters until the end of the novel, he's really an expert criminal and escaped convict named Jacques Collin, or "Death-Dodger." Vautrin wears a wig and dyes his whiskers. He is a jovial, likeable neighbor who wins others' trust and affection; Madame Vauquer even entrusts him with a key to the boarding house. At the same time, he has a certain toughness and coldness about him. Vautrin notices Rastignac's hunger for social success and tries to exploit this, tempting the young man to take a shortcut—he will arrange for Victorine's brother to be murdered so that she'll receive a huge inheritance, benefiting both Rastignac (whom she transparently loves) and Vautrin (whom Rastignac will grant a commission). Vautrin lives by an amoral code, believing that there is no fixed moral point in the universe; he sees people and actions simply as means to ends. His dream is to own a massive plantation in the American South. He's ultimately thwarted by Gondureau, Mademoiselle Michonneau, and Poiret, who conspire to get him arrested. Vautrin exits the story with a sneering denunciation of the other boarders' hypocrisy.

Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant – The vicomtesse is Rastignac's distant cousin. His aunt, Madame de Marcillac, introduces them. The vicomtesse is one of the richest and most famous aristocrats in Paris society; though she's married, she is having an affair with the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto. The vicomtesse doesn't learn until the last minute—long after the rest of Paris society—that the marquis is marrying someone else, and she chooses to leave Paris rather than continue to live before society in a state of humiliation and pretended composure. She agrees to serve as a kind of "fairy godmother" to Rastignac and is genuinely fond of him, and he is devoted to her in turn. Although the vicomtesse advises him never to reveal his true feelings and to use other people, the novel suggests that she ultimately possesses greater integrity than that, and that she isn't willing to play by society's restrictive rules.

Madame Anastasie de Restaud – Anastasie is one of Goriot's two daughters and the sister of Delphine, with whom she is locked in a petty social rivalry. She is a dark-eyed, curvy, yet dainty woman. She catches Rastignac's eye at a ball, but she bars him from her house after he makes an embarrassing reference to her father, whom she is forbidden by her husband, Monsieur de Restaud, to visit. Anastasie also has a lover, Comte Maxime de Trailles. She visits her father for the last time after he falls unconscious, and she fails to attend his funeral.

Madame Delphine de Nucingen – Delphine is Goriot's second daughter and the sister of Anastasie de Restaud, with whom she is locked in a petty social rivalry. Delphine is married to Baron de Nucingen, who is very rich, but because Delphine hasn't been recognized at the French court, she is desperate for social advancement. For that reason, Rastignac pursues her as a potential lover, hoping to offer her a social connection with his cousin, Madame de Beauséant—but he quickly develops genuine feelings for her. Delphine furnishes a luxurious apartment for Rastignac, though it's never clear to what degree her affection for him is genuine. She refuses to visit her father on his deathbed or attend his funeral, showing how selfish she truly is.

Madame Vauquer – Madame Vauquer is a widow who has run a Paris boarding house, the Maison Vauquer, for decades. At around 50 years old, Madame Vauquer is plump and pale, and she seems to match her shabby yet respectable boarding house. Madame Vauquer is fond of her boarders, except for Goriot, whom she blames for a thwarted attempt at romance (one motivated chiefly by her desire for a fortune and social respectability). She has a selfish streak.

Victorine Taillefer – Victorine is a young woman who lives in the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. Madame Couture is her guardian. Victorine's mother died, and her wealthy father, Taillefer, refuses to acknowledge her; his massive inheritance is bequeathed to Victorine's brother instead. Every year, Victorine visits her father to ask for his mercy, but he still refuses to see her. Victorine is melancholy but beautiful, the most sincere and innocent character in the novel. She is a devout Catholic. She also has a crush on Rastignac, who cruelly leads her to believe there's hope for marriage at one point. Victorine eventually gains her inheritance after Vautrin has her brother killed, but it brings her no joy.

Mademoiselle Michonneau – Mademoiselle Michonneau is an elderly spinster who lives in the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. She is skeletally thin and wears a menacing expression. She appears to have a romantic understanding with Poiret. She betrays Vautrin to the police for a monetary reward, and the rest of the boarders kick her out for this betrayal.

Bianchon – Bianchon is a medical student and friend of Rastignac's who dines at Madame Vauquer's boarding house, Rastignac's residence. He believes that happiness lies within a person, and he isn't tempted by Paris society, choosing to pursue a modest medical practice in the countryside. He faithfully tends Goriot on his deathbed.

Madame la Comtesse de l'Ambermesnil – Madame de l'Ambermesnil is a 36-year-old widow who lives in the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house, for a brief time. She befriends Madame Vauquer but then thwarts the latter's romantic intentions toward Goriot by trying to steal him for herself. After this scheme fails, Madame d l'Ambermesnil leaves the boarding house with six months' unpaid rent.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Madame Couture – Madame Couture is a widow who lives in the Maison Vauquer, Madame Vauquer's boarding house. She is Victorine Taillefer's guardian, a relative of the girl's deceased

mother. Madame Couture dotes on Victorine like her own daughter and, like Victorine, is a devout Catholic.

Poiret – Monsieur Poiret is an elderly boarder in the Maison Vauquer. He is shriveled and shaky-legged and looks as if he's suffered in life. Poiret is friends with Mademoiselle Michonneau, and the two seem to have a romantic understanding. In conversation, he tends to just repeat what other people say.

Sylvie – Typically referred to as "fat Sylvie," she is the cook at Madame Vauquer's boarding house. Sylvie often gossips and complains.

Christophe – Christophe does odd jobs at Madame Vauquer's boarding house. He attends Goriot's funeral and is one of the only characters to speak kindly of the old man.

Monsieur de Restaud – Monsieur de Restaud is Anastasie's husband. He tolerates Anastasie's lover Maxime, but he doesn't let Anastasie see her father, Goriot, whom he disdains.

Baron de Nucingen – The baron is Madame Delphine de Nucingen's husband; he is a shrewd German banker and baron of the Holy Roman Empire. The baron and Delphine do not love each other, and he refuses to let her see Goriot.

Comte Maxime de Trailles – The comte is Anastasie's lover; he's a haughty, well-groomed young man with a fancy carriage. Anastasie's husband, Monsieur de Restaud, knows about him and tolerates the affair. Maxime is addicted to gambling and accumulates huge debts.

De Marsay – De Marsay is Madame Delphine de Nucingen's lover, who abandons her.

Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto – The marquis is a wealthy and famous Portuguese nobleman with whom the Vicomtesse de Beauséant has been having an affair. He is engaged to a woman named Mademoiselle de Rochefide.

Taillefer – Taillefer is Victorine's merciless father who disowns her in favor of leaving his estate to Victorine's brother.

Madame de Marcillac – Madame de Marcillac is Rastignac's aunt.

Gobseck – Gobseck is a Paris moneylender.

Madame la Duchesse de Langeais – The duchesse is a good friend of the Vicomtesse de Beauséant who delivers the news that the marquis is engaged to someone else.

Monsieur Gondureau – Gondureau is the police detective who brings about Vautrin's arrest.

Mademoiselle de Rochefide – Mademoiselle de Rochefide is the Marquis de Ajuda-Pinto's fiancée.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE FALSE ALLURE OF WEALTH

In *Père Goriot*, the lives of a young law student, Rastignac, and an elderly neighbor in his boarding house, Goriot, intertwine in 19th-century Paris. Neither of these men has much money—Rastignac was born on a struggling country estate, and Goriot is a retired pasta-maker—yet they both end up ensnared by a society that values wealth above all else. The naïve Rastignac, once introduced to Goriot's wealthy daughters, begins to desire their lifestyle, and despite warnings that it's not everything it seems, he gets drawn into their way of life. Meanwhile, Goriot impoverishes himself in order to ensure that his daughters can maintain their lifestyle despite chronic financial problems. Through these men's lives, Balzac argues that his society's obsession with money distorts and consumes everyone who is caught up in it, twisting people's sense of reality and never delivering the security they crave.

Wealthy people inhabit a different, more outwardly enchanting society from the one poorer people know. After visiting his housemate Goriot's richly married daughters and seeing their extravagant homes, Rastignac observes that wealthy people have a completely different lifestyle and worldview: "His imagination [soared] into the upper reaches of Parisian society, [...] while broadening his mind and his conscience. He saw the world as it is: laws and morality unavailing with the rich [...] 'Vautrin is right, wealth is virtue,' he said to himself." To put it a different way, wealth even creates its own system of morality, in that people who possess wealth aren't bound by the same laws that govern the rest of society. Rastignac finds such a world mysteriously appealing. When Rastignac returns home from visiting his new wealthy friends, he is shocked by the difference between their lifestyle and the shabbiness of his boarding house: "He was revolted at the sight of such wretchedness [...] The transition was too abrupt, the contrast too complete, not to arouse in him cravings of boundless ambition. On the one hand the fresh and charming images of the most elegant society [...] on the other, [...] faces on which passions had left behind only their strings and mechanism." Now that Rastignac has seen wealth firsthand, he covets it for himself—life in the boarding house, which was tolerable before, no longer seems acceptable to him. Rastignac idealizes the wealthy world to which he's been introduced, and in light of it, a modest lifestyle seems more deprived than it really is.

The novel also highlights how outward wealth masks a more complex reality, as a wealthy lifestyle demands a constant scrambling to maintain itself. Goriot's daughter Delphine explains to Rastignac, "That is how half the women in Paris live;

outward luxury, within—the cruellest worries. I know poor creatures even more wretched than myself. Some women are obliged to get their tradesmen to draw up false accounts. Others are forced to cheat their husbands. […] There are some poor women who make their children go hungry and have to scrounge to get a dress." Wealth comes with a cost: once someone attains a certain position in society, one must constantly fight to maintain that position, or at least the *appearance* of that position, even at great cost to one's integrity and happiness. A wealthy lifestyle thus tends to overwhelm one's sense of self. Rastignac eventually succumbs to the appeal of the life of Parisian luxury, especially after being set up in a luxurious apartment when Delphine becomes his mistress: "his remaining scruples had disappeared […] By enjoying the material advantages of wealth, […] he had sloughed off his skin as a provincial, and smoothly moved into a position from which he could look forward to a fine future. […] he saw himself so far removed from the Rastignac who had come to Paris the year before, that, […] he asked himself if at that moment there was any resemblance between his two selves." Now that Rastignac has access to the rewards of the wealthy class, loyalty to his poorer, provincial upbringing—which he'd once imagined to be essential to his identity—is set aside. This suggests that a lifestyle created by wealth, once one gets a taste of it, has a distorting effect on a person's identity.

Money can entrap well-intended people in other ways, too. As Père Goriot assures his daughters regarding the financial straits that he willingly endures for the sake of their comfort, "The knowledge that you were comfortable and happy as far as money was concerned relieved all my pains and soothed my woes. Money is life. Cash can do anything." Goriot sees money as a guarantee of his happiness, in that it has the power to remove worries and create happiness for those he loves most. But in the meantime, Goriot becomes increasingly impoverished, and he never asks whether the happiness secured by money is genuine and lasting. After Goriot's death, Rastignac and his medical student friend, Bianchon, have to scrape together the funds to have the old man buried, since his wealthy sons-in-law refuse to contribute: "They had to gauge the last respects due to the old man by the limited sum of money they had available." In this way, money becomes the measure of a person's life. In particular, Goriot's poverty in death shows what was most important to him—his daughters' material comfort—but it consumed his own comfort as a consequence. By this time in the novel, Rastignac, too, has become more cynical about the way money consumes people's lives and distorts their moral compasses. Though his care for the dying Goriot suggests that he isn't totally corrupted by it, Rastignac also doesn't know how to extricate himself from the wealth-driven system he has chosen to enter.

AMBITION AND CORRUPTION

While wealth is one aspect of the allure of Parisian society, it's not the only temptation that awaits a young, idealistic man from the provinces, like Rastignac. Rastignac comes from a hardworking background and arrives in Paris eager to launch a career that will let him distinguish himself and also support his struggling family. But he soon discovers that truly succeeding involves more than becoming a good lawyer—it also necessitates learning how to navigate a complex and demanding social world, which puts him, as an outsider, at an immediate disadvantage. Into his confusion steps Vautrin, a secret criminal who argues that the only way for Rastignac to realize his ambitions is to shun conventional morality, and who offers to help him achieve this through suspect means. Through the dynamic between the naïve Rastignac and the calculating Vautrin, Balzac argues that ambition makes people vulnerable to corruption, hinting that society is structured in such a way that those who refuse to be corrupted can't achieve success.

Rastignac faces a steep learning curve when he attempts to enter Paris society and must skillfully navigate this social world in order to get ahead. Rastignac's ambition is a product of his impoverished upbringing: He "was one of those young men trained by poverty for hard work, who […] from the start prepare for a successful career by working out the scope of their studies, adapting them in advance to future trends in society[.]" Rastignac is the hope of a large family living on a struggling country estate, and he arrives in Paris determined to start the most lucrative career he can find not just for his own sake, but for theirs as well. Rastignac discovers that mastering Parisian social graces is more complicated than he had imagined. After accidentally giving offense to Madame de Restaud by referring to her father, Goriot, as "Père" instead of "Monsieur," he realizes how inaccessible success already appears to be: "How can I move in society," he thinks to himself, "when to manage it properly you need […] polished boots […] gold chains, white doeskin gloves at six francs a pair for the daytime, and yellow gloves every evening?" To have any hope of climbing socially, in other words, one must already have the means to navigate within that society, whether that means fancy accessories or knowledge of the correct titles to use. Not only must one be able to avoid social *faux pas* in order to fulfill one's ambitions, one must also project a certain image. Society woman Madame de Beauséant tells Rastignac, "In Paris success is everything, it is the key to power. If women believe you to have wit and talent, so will men, unless you disillusion them. Then you can set your heart on anything, every **door** will be open to you." By this time, Rastignac has become so distracted by trying to enter the doors of society that he is neglecting the law studies that first brought him to Paris, showing how social-climbing can detract from more meaningful aspects of a person's life.

Facing an uphill battle, the ambitious are easily corrupted, as shown by Rastignac's experience with Vautrin—a fellow boarder who, unknown to anyone else in the house, is an escaped criminal who cons and exploits naïve people. Vautrin warns Rastignac that by the time he establishes himself in his chosen field and takes on the responsibilities of providing for a wife, his life will be half over. "You stand at the crossroads of your life, young man, you must choose. You have already made one choice; you went to see your Beauséant cousin and had a taste of luxury. […] That day you came back with a word marked on your forehead […] *Succeed*! succeed at any price." Vautrin plays on Rastignac's impatience for success by suggesting that Rastignac's future depends on the choices he makes right now. Vautrin explains to Rastignac that it's no good playing by conventional rules in order to find success—most people, he claims, take shortcuts. "Do you know the way to get on here? Through brilliant intelligence or skillful corruption. […] It's no good being honest," he says. Playing on the young man's desire and his obligation to his family, he promises to help Rastignac find a shortcut to wealth by securing for him a wealthy, well-endowed wife in exchange for a share of the riches. "Out of any sixty society weddings taking place in Paris," he assures Rastignac, "there are forty-seven based on transactions of this kind." That is, Rastignac's willingness to take such a shortcut already shows that he's fit for higher society. Vautrin arranges to secure a wealthy wife for Rastignac by killing off the brother of a fellow boarder, Victorine, in a duel, assuring that Victorine will have a tremendous dowry—thereby establishing Rastignac's place in Parisian society, allowing him to provide for his poor family, and ensuring a hefty commission for Vautrin himself. Rastignac struggles with his conscience and decides to warn Victorine's family about Vautrin's intentions, only to have Vautrin drug his wine the night before, incapacitating him. Though Rastignac avoids being made complicit in Vautrin's crime, he discovers that access to society requires a steeper price than he is willing to pay.

After Rastignac escapes the worst of Vautrin's corrupting influence, the novel still ends on an ambiguous note: "Rastignac, now all alone, walked a few paces to the higher part of the cemetery, and saw Paris spread out […] His eyes fastened almost hungrily on the […] home to that fashionable society to which he had sought to gain admission. He […] pronounced the epic challenge: 'It's between the two of us now!'" In other words, Rastignac is still ambitious to secure a place for himself in Paris's higher society, and just because he has avoided one corrupting snare doesn't mean he won't fall prey to another—his ambition still remains, making him vulnerable.

MANIPULATION, DELUSION, AND BETRAYAL

In *Père Goriot*, there are many instances of characters believing what they want to believe, even while they're being actively manipulated by others—or characters who abandon ideals in order to manipulate. Often, this occurs when a character is desperate to advance his or her own cause, no matter what harm is done to others in the process. Or, it happens when characters stubbornly believe in the authenticity of a relationship based on a delusion, lest they be faced with difficult truths about themselves. Rastignac's bold manipulation of his sisters for money, encouraged by Vautrin's amoral outlook, is one example. Perhaps the most heart-wrenching is Goriot's lifelong devotion to his daughters, despite ample evidence that they only care about his money, not about him. Through characters like Rastignac and Goriot, who manipulate others for gain or allow themselves to be used, Balzac suggests that people are equally prone to selfishly compromise principle in order to manipulate others and to allow themselves to be used in order to cling to false beliefs.

The novel highlights how the desire for social advancement leads a person to manipulate others. To get the money for a wardrobe that will impress Parisian women, Rastignac begs for money from his sisters, who have a limited income: "He wrote to each of his sisters to ask them for their savings, and in order to extract from them a sacrifice which they would be only too happy to make for him, […] he appealed to their discretion by playing on the theme of honour, which always strikes a sensitive and resonant chord in the hearts of the young." Rastignac plays on his sisters' idealism in order to gain entrance into high society. His conscience is bothering him—he wants his sisters to remain discreet and not let the rest of the family know what he's asking of them—yet he deceptively appeals to the need to appear "honorable" in Paris, which he knows will inspire them to give more generously than they can afford. A successful social life demands that a person compromise their ideals for the sake of manipulating others. "If I have one more piece of advice for you, my pet," Vautrin tells Rastignac, "it is not to stick to your opinions any more firmly than to your words. When you are asked for them, sell them. […] There are no such things as principles, only events; no laws, only circumstances. Your exceptional man adjusts to events and circumstances in order to control them." Vautrin insinuates that where an ordinary person might appeal to stable principles and never get anywhere as a result, an "exceptional" person adapts to whatever circumstances demand—even if it means abandoning ideals and misleading or betraying others in the process.

However, victims of manipulation are somewhat complicit, because people generally cling to what they choose to believe. When the residents of the boarding house are shocked to learn that Vautrin is actually a criminal mastermind who's been deceiving them all along, Vautrin reacts scornfully. "The brand we bear on our shoulders [a mark branded on convicted thieves] is not as shameful as what you have in your hearts, flabby members of a putrid society. The best among you could not stand up to me!" In Vautrin's opinion, the others aren't

necessarily any morally better than he is. It's just that they continue to outwardly behave by society's expectations (making them hypocrites), whereas he, more honest about his failure to adhere to ideals, refuses to be bound by society. The others, implicitly proving Vautrin's point, don't respond to this charge, continuing to argue among themselves over how a man as seemingly kind and upstanding as Vautrin could actually be a criminal. This delusional mindset is also evident when Goriot is on his deathbed, and he sees what he wants to see. Goriot's last words are a joyful whisper, "Ah! My angels!" as he believes that Rastignac and the medical student tending him are actually his neglectful daughters, who never show up to bid him goodbye. Thus "that sigh summed up his whole life; he deceived himself to the end." In other words, Goriot has spent his whole life believing that his daughters, Anastasie and Delphine, are truly devoted to him, lodging him in a self-defeating cycle of financial support that drains his resources and ultimately his life. This scene suggests, then, that by clinging to what he wants to see, Goriot brings about his own end. This is Balzac's final remark on the role of manipulation in human life: even if people don't delude and betray others, they help perpetuate the cycle by willfully taking comfort in manipulative lies.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The very title of *Père Goriot* suggests the centrality of a paternal relationship to its plot (*père* is French for "father"). Goriot, an elderly, retired pasta-maker, has devoted decades to providing for his daughters, Anastasie and Delphine. By outward measures, he appears to have succeeded: both women enjoy socially advantageous marriages above the class into which they were born. Under the surface, though, things are less harmonious: Goriot's sons-in-law snobbishly refuse to associate with him, and his daughters go along with this, only seeing their father in secret, and usually just when they need to be helped out of financial strain. Over time, their love for Goriot is consumed by their financial dependence on him—and this is evident to everyone but himself. Goriot goes along with this, idolizing his daughters and destroying himself in the process. Yet, in following the tragedy of Goriot's self-deluding relationship with his daughters, Balzac also critiques the society that created it—suggesting not only that family relationships can become idolatrous, but that society rewards status-driven relationships while stifling those that are based on true affection.

In keeping with his society's expectations, Goriot pours his meager financial resources into his daughters' marriages, even when this ends up costing him personal involvement in their lives. As it's explained to Rastignac, Goriot is "a good father who is said to have given each of them five or six hundred thousand francs to ensure their happiness by marrying them well, and only kept back [a meager amount] a year for himself. He thought that his daughters would remain his daughters and that in their homes he had created two places where he would be able to live, two houses where he would be adored and spoilt. Within two years his sons-in-law had banished him from their society as if he were the most wretched of wretches." Goriot has provided for his daughters in the best way he knows how, according to the logic of his society, by marrying them off. In this way, he assumes that he is also providing for his comfortable retirement in the long run, but he is thwarted by the disdain of the men who now have real authority in his daughters' lives: their husbands. In other words, a loving father-daughter dynamic is disrupted by the expectations of class and society.

Goriot's relationship with his daughters is ultimately one-sided, bringing Goriot an illusory happiness that chases him to the grave. Goriot's comfort and happiness are secondary to that of his daughters. Goriot explains, "My life, my own life, is all in my two daughters. If they enjoy themselves, if they are happy and finely dressed, if they have carpets to walk on, what does it matter what clothes I wear or what sort of bedroom I have? I don't feel cold if they are warm. I never feel sad if they are laughing. My only sorrows are theirs." In fact, Goriot equates his experiences in life with his daughters'; his existence doesn't have meaning apart from them. Goriot sees fatherhood as a transcendent experience, explaining, "when I became a father I understood God. [...] Only I love my daughters more than God loves the world, because the world is not as beautiful as God, and my daughters are much more beautiful than I." Goriot's convoluted explanation means that he occupies a paternal experience of love and care in his daughters' lives, much as God does in relation to the world; yet, unlike God with respect to the world, Goriot is inferior to his daughters. This tortured combination of deifying and renouncing himself shows, again, that Goriot's existence revolves around his daughters. Near the end of his life, Goriot begins to perceive that Anastasie and Delphine don't really love him, but only care about his ability to help them out of financial straits. "Money buys anything, even daughters. [...] If I still had wealth to leave, they would be tending me, looking after me; I should hear them, see them. [...] At least when a poor wretch is loved he can be sure of that love. No, I'd rather be rich, I could see them then." Even as the truth about their relationship dawns on Goriot, he would rather see his daughters—allowing him to maintain the fiction of mutual love—than face reality head-on.

On his deathbed, Goriot muses, "You have to be dying to learn what children are. [...] You give them life, they give you death. [...] No, they won't come! For ten years I have known how it would be. I sometimes said so to myself, but I didn't dare to believe it." Deep down, even Goriot has suspected the true nature of his daughters' character and their affections toward him. Ultimately, there are two tragedies at work: Goriot's idolizing, self-deluding devotion, and the situation of women pulled between their duty to their father and their perceived

duties to society via the high-class marriages in which they are caught. But the latter causes the former to become distorted beyond recognition, and in his desperation, Goriot, too, becomes the victim of these forces.

EMOTIONS, SINCERITY, AND CALCULATION

In *Père Goriot*, Balzac often sees characters as products of their environment. For example, the narrator describes the Paris setting as follows: "a valley full of suffering that is real, and of joy that is often false, where life is so hectic that it takes something quite extraordinary to produce feelings that last." The environment, in other words, stirs up fleeting emotions that don't endure and that sometimes prove to be inauthentic. This environment is disorienting for those who, like Rastignac of France's southern provinces, naively assume that genuine emotion should be openly expressed. Other characters, especially society women like his cousin Madame de Beauséant, tutor Rastignac in the suppression of genuine emotion and the use of calculated emotions as tools for getting one's way in this fast-paced world. Yet by portraying the heartbreak and exile of characters like Madame de Beauséant, Rastignac, and Goriot, Balzac suggests that a calculating environment like Paris ultimately erodes people's humanity, becoming an empty shell by ruining and expelling those who can't live this way.

In Paris, emotions are tools and weapons for getting one's way. A newcomer to Paris, Rastignac learns from a would-be paramour, Madame de Restaud, and from his cousin, the vicomtesse Madame de Beauséant, that emotional transparency isn't valued in Parisian high society; rather, concealment and calculation are. The vicomtesse explains to Rastignac that "If you want to succeed [...] start by not showing your feelings so plainly." Later, when Rastignac says something the vicomtesse knows to be insincere, she is encouraged by his so-called progress: "For the first time the Southerner had become calculating. Between Madame de Restaud's blue boudoir and Madame de Beauséant's pink salon he had taken an Honours course in that Parisian Law which is never mentioned, although it constitutes an advanced social jurisprudence which, well learned and well practised, opens every **door**." The sarcastic comparison to Rastignac's law studies suggests that this sort of emotional calculation is an unspoken, yet essential, aspect of personal advancement within Parisian society. But such personal advancement comes at the cost of genuine relationships with others. As Madame de Beauséant advises Rastignac in greater detail, "The more coldly calculating you are, the further you will go. [...] Accept men and women as mere post horses to be left worn out at every stage and you will reach the summit of your ambitions. [...] But if you have any genuine feelings, hide them like a treasure; never let anyone suspect them, or you will be lost." Madame de Beauséant's chilling comparison—of people to horses ridden relentlessly from one stage of life to the next—clearly shows that other human beings are intended to be used, and that revealing one's true feelings for others ruins one's chances at advancement.

Even when a person tries to abide by these calculating rules, they will likely be left heartbroken. Rastignac discovers that even if a person succeeds at gaining an admired position in society through calculating displays of emotion, they can still be emotionally entangled and manipulated in turn. Over time, his calculated affair with Delphine de Nucingen stirs up true feelings: "Whether she really loved him or was just leading him on, Madame de Nucingen had inflicted on Rastignac all the pains of a genuine passion, drawing on all the resources of feminine intrigue as practised in Paris. [...] For the past few months she had so inflamed Eugene's senses that she finally affected his inward heart. If in the initial stages of his liaison the student had believed himself to be the master, Madame de Nucingen had now gained the upper hand[.]" Rastignac discovers that toying with emotions is dangerous. For the inexperienced, emotions employed as weapons can turn on the user in unexpected, self-defeating ways.

Balzac portrays Paris as a place where genuine emotion cannot thrive and where sincere people either waste away or are driven out. As Rastignac watches Goriot die, he reflects, "Noble souls cannot stay long in this world. Indeed, how could deep feelings keep company with such a mean, petty, superficial society?" Madame de Beauséant, too, can't ultimately follow through on the advice she gave Rastignac—she ends up leaving Paris, humiliated when she discovers that her lover is marrying someone else and unwilling to maintain a façade of composure. Ultimately, Balzac critiques a society that is consuming itself by forcing people to suppress and distort the very emotions that make them human.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DOORS

Doors symbolize access to the higher echelons of Paris society and, therefore, to personal success. For a vulnerable character like Victorine, for example, the door of her father's house is repeatedly slammed in her face, denying her access to the social stability her rightful inheritance would afford. As an idealistic young student, Eugène de Rastignac quickly learns that an unwritten code of social behavior "opens every door" to those who make the effort to master it—and that doors are both figuratively literally closed to those who remain ignorant to it, as when his mentioning of Père Goriot gets him

ejected from Madame de Restaud's house. The opening and closing of doors—and the matter of people's willingness to learn and abide by the rules governing such access—recurs throughout the novel, showing the delicacy of social connections in this inflexibly status-driven world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Père Goriot* published in 1991.

Chapter 1 Quotes

At the moment one of these two rooms belonged to a young man who had come to Paris from the Angoulême area to study law, and whose large family endured the harshest sacrifices in order to send him twelve hundred francs a year. Eugène de Rastignac, for such was his name, was one of those young men trained by poverty for hard work, who realize from their earliest youth what their parents expect of them, and from the start prepare for a successful career by working out the scope of their studies, adapting them in advance to future trends in society so that they can be the first to exploit it.

Related Characters: Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces Eugène de Rastignac, one of the protagonists of *Père Goriot*. Rastignac comes to Paris with one ambition: to become a lawyer, not only so that he can establish himself in life, but so that he can support his struggling family. His residence at the run-down boarding house indicates his socially and financially precarious position. Rastignac has grown up working hard for his family's sake and expecting to provide for them by adapting his studies to the demands of society (that is, studying law so that he can make good money). However, Rastignac's storyline in *Père Goriot* will show how a young man's ambition, originating in a sense of obligation to family, can be twisted and corrupted. Rastignac will face an uphill struggle in Paris, discovering that a successful entrance into Parisian society demands more than proficiency at law. The pressure to follow alternate paths to success—and the allure of luxuries he's never experienced before—will threaten to corrupt his well-intended ambitions.

The sight of his family in such constant distress, which they had generously kept from him, the comparison he was forced to make between his sisters, who had seemed so lovely when he was a child, and the Parisian women who were the living fulfilment of his earlier dreams of beauty, the precarious future of this large family which depended on him, the penny-pinching care with which he saw them save every scrap and crumb, and drink the dregs from the wine press, in a word numerous circumstances which it would be pointless to relate, vastly increased his desire for success and made him crave distinction.

Related Characters: Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After Rastignac's first year of law studies, he visits his family on their struggling estate in Southwestern France. His experience is shocking because the family's financially strained condition—which he'd always accepted as normal—contrasts sharply with the wealth and glamor of the capital. Rastignac finally recognizes their relative poverty and the weight of their dependence upon him to improve their lot in the future; even his sisters' beauty seems muted compared to the women he's now seen in Paris. The combination of these circumstances inflames Rastignac's desire to not only succeed but to distinguish himself in his field. This sense of striking contrast between wealth and poverty, luxury and shabbiness, will emerge numerous times in the novel. It suggests that Rastignac is especially susceptible to envy—making his poverty seem more pronounced than it really is, and Paris's luxury more desirable—which in turn amplifies his ambition. This quote thereby gives an early hint of Rastignac's vulnerability to corruption.

By pronouncing the name of Père Goriot Eugène had again waved the magic wand, but this time with an effect quite contrary to that produced by the words 'related to Madame de Beauséant.' He was in the situation of someone admitted as a favour into the house of a curio collector who inadvertently knocks into a cabinet full of sculptured figures, breaking off three or four insecurely fastened heads. He wished the earth would swallow him up.

Related Characters: Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant,

Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Père Goriot , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

As a newcomer to Parisian society, Rastignac is eager to establish a foothold as quickly as possible. He knows that success doesn't just depend on his capabilities as a lawyer, but on his ability to distinguish himself socially. Visiting Madame de Restaud, a young woman who'd attracted him at a ball, he initially gains ground by mentioning his distant cousin, Madame de Beauséant. But when Rastignac mentions his housemate Goriot (he knows the old man has some connection with young Madame, though he doesn't know what it is), he quickly loses the shaky ground he'd gained. Though the reason for Rastignac's misstep isn't yet explained, this passage shows how climbing Paris's social ladder is a very delicate game—it's not just important to be able to drop names, but to drop exactly the *right* names. Rastignac's desperation to use personal connections for social leverage suggests that, because of his ambitious attitude, he will eventually become willing to use other *people*, not just their names, for his own benefit—a risk for anyone who's willing to play by the rules of high society.

'Their father [...] is said to have given each of them five or six hundred thousand francs to ensure their happiness by marrying them well, and only kept back eight or ten thousand livres a year for himself. He thought that his daughters would remain his daughters and that in their homes he had created two places where he would be able to live, two houses where he would be adored and spoilt. Within two years his sons-in-law had banished him from their society as if he were the most wretched of wretches...'

Related Characters: Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant (speaker), Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Père Goriot , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

The boarding house is filled with rumors about Goriot and the beautiful young women who frequently visit him. When Rastignac asks his cousin the vicomtesse about these women, she explains the mysterious Goriot's background: the women really are his daughters, whom Goriot has endowed handsomely so that they could have the socially advantageous marriages they desired. Because of this, Goriot himself lives in relative poverty, and his wealthy sons-in-law aren't willing to be seen as connected to him. This quote illustrates Balzac's argument about the allure of wealth and the problems that social climbing creates. It also shows how the relationship between a father and his children can become distorted: Goriot has essentially squandered his life savings in order to buy societal positions for his daughters. At the same time, it shows that Goriot's actions are self-interested, too—he has looked out for his own comfort in securing these positions for the girls, suggesting that, per Balzac's argument, 19th-century Parisian society (where the novel is set) *incentivizes* distorted relationships that value social position over ties of affection.

'You can understand that under the Empire the two sons-in-law did not make too much fuss about receiving in their homes the old revolutionary of '93; it was still all right under Buonaparte. But when the Bourbons came back, the old chap was an embarrassment to Monsieur de Restaud, and still more so to the banker. The daughters, who may perhaps still have been fond of their father, tried to play a double game, keeping their father and their husbands sweet at the same time. [...] Personally, my dear, I believe that genuine feelings are neither blind nor stupid, so the poor old 93er's heart must have bled.'

Related Characters: Madame la Duchesse de Langeais (speaker), Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Baron de Nucingen, Monsieur de Restaud, Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Père Goriot , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

The events of *Père Goriot* fall during a period of France's history known as the Bourbon Restoration, which roughly spanned the years between 1814 and 1830. During this period, the Bourbon kings restored the monarchy (albeit in a less absolutist form than had prevailed before the Revolution of 1793), and a newly-risen aristocracy enjoyed increasing prominence and prosperity. These historical conditions make Goriot problematic to his sons-in-

law—both because of his association with the Revolution decades earlier and because of his current poverty. He is now an embarrassment to them. Consequently, Goriot's daughters are torn between loving their father and supporting their husbands, leading inevitably to strain in their relationship with him. This quote thus illustrates the societal pressures that can shape family relationships for the worse. The remark about "genuine feelings" also supports Balzac's argument that those who wear their emotions on their sleeve, as opposed to stifling them in favor of calculating behavior, will tend to suffer in a society that favors pretense.

❝ 'The more coldly calculating you are, the further you will go. Strike without pity and people will fear you. Accept men and women as mere post horses to be left worn out at every stage and you will reach the summit of your ambitions. Don't forget that you will be nothing here unless you have a woman to take an interest in you. You need one who is young, rich, elegant. But if you have any genuine feelings, hide them like a treasure; never let anyone suspect them, or you will be lost.'

Related Characters: Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant (speaker), Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

After humiliating himself at Madame de Restaud's house, Rastignac goes to his cousin, the Vicomtesse de Beauséant, for advice on navigating Parisian society. Her biggest piece of advice to Rastignac is that he must be willing to hide his genuine emotions, instead using other people in order to attain the social standing he desires. In this view, human beings are just tools to be used until they're worn out, like "post horses" (horses ridden for one stage of a journey until they're exhausted, then swapped for a fresh one). It's important to note that there's a heavy layer of irony to the vicomtesse's advice: she believes this is what society demands, but she doesn't believe that it's morally right. In fact, at the end of the novel, she leaves Paris rather than pretending to be unaffected by her lover's very public betrayal of her. So even though the vicomtesse voices one of the most dehumanizing statements in the novel, she ends up being one of the few characters to display genuine integrity by *not* denying her emotions.

❝ 'All right, let Père Goriot win you admission to Madame Delphine de Nucingen's house. The beautiful Madame de Nucingen will be the standard you bear. Enjoy the marks of her favour and women will dote on you. […] You will be very successful. In Paris success is everything, it is the key to power. If women believe you to have wit and talent, so will men, unless you disillusion them. Then you can set your heart on anything, every door will be open to you. Then you will learn what the world is really like: an assembly of dupes and knaves. Don't be counted with either.'

Related Characters: Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant (speaker), Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Père Goriot , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Rastignac goes to his cousin, the vicomtesse, for advice on navigating Paris society. In his wealthy cousin's opinion, the key to gaining a successful foothold in society is first by winning the affections of a sought-after woman. If he succeeds in this, he'll soon be regarded as a popular and desirable person in general—opening "doors" (the novel's symbol of social opportunity) everywhere he goes. Since Rastignac committed an embarrassing *faux pas* while visiting the Madame de Restaud, the vicomtesse suggests Madame de Restaud's sister, Madame Delphine de Nucingen, instead. Notably, Madame de Nucingen is not a marriageable single woman—in fact, she's not only married, she already has a lover. But Rastignac learns that such romantic entanglements are taken for granted in Paris society. His attempts to form a bond with Madame de Nucingen also tie Rastignac's fate to that of his downtrodden neighbor, Goriot, who happens to be de Nucingen's father. Though it's debatable whether Rastignac winds up being a "dupe" in the process, it's probably his genuine care for Goriot's wellbeing that saves him from becoming the "knave" his cousin warns him about.

He was ashamed of what he had written. How intense would be their heartfelt wishes for him, how pure their fervent prayers to heaven! How they would delight in their self-sacrifices! How his mother would grieve if she could not send the whole sum! He would use such fine sentiments, such fearful sacrifices as rungs in a ladder to reach Delphine de Nucingen. Tears, a last few grains of incense cast on the sacred altar of the family, fell from his eyes.

Related Characters: Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

While beginning his campaign to get Madame Delphine de Nucingen to notice him so that he can be successful in society, Rastignac realizes a certain disadvantage: he has no money to allow him to dress the part. The only avenue open to him is his family, who—as rural nobility on a declining estate—already have very limited resources. So Rastignac writes them heartfelt appeals, asking his mother to sell an heirloom if she needs to and appealing to his little sisters' sense of honor.

But after writing the letters, Rastignac feels pangs of conscience. He realizes he has taken advantage of their devotion and generosity, especially by manipulating their affections. By not explaining the specifics of his appeal, Rastignac lets them believe that his need is more life-and-death than it really is, betraying the idealism of his sisters especially. But he justifies these things (tears notwithstanding) by promising himself that he will pay his family back handsomely after he succeeds in becoming rich. This quote is an example of the novel's argument that ambitious people are especially susceptible to having their well-meaning ambitions (in this case, the desire to better his family's position) corrupted by the demands of a shallow, status-obsessed society.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The moment money slips into a student's pocket, [...] [h]is aspirations are as boundless as his ability to achieve them. He desires everything and anything, he is gay, generous and expansive. In short the bird which only yesterday had no wings has now spread them in full flight. The penniless student snaps up a crumb of pleasure like a dog snatching a bone amid countless perils [...] the young man who for a fleeting moment has a few gold coins to jingle in his pocket savours his pleasures, counts them one by one, revels in them, sails through the air, has forgotten the meaning of the word 'poverty'. Paris is all his.

Related Characters: Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an illustration of the delusions that money can create, especially in those who are unaccustomed to having any. When his family follows through on sending money to help him buy a new, socially acceptable wardrobe, Rastignac feels like a rich man. In turn, this inflames Rastignac's ambitions all the more, causing him to forget the limitations that still lie heavily upon him and will come back to haunt him once the money runs out. But when that time comes, Rastignac will already be entangled in Paris's higher society and will need even more money to maintain the lifestyle he's finally gained access to. This process of getting trapped by illusory markers of status illustrates the false allure of wealth that permeates the novel as a whole. In all these ways, too, Rastignac stands as an example of France's newly arisen aristocracy in general. Following the Revolution, during the restoration of the Bourbon kings, the newly emerged aristocracy had to continually fight to maintain the tenuous position they'd attained in society, sometimes maintaining it only through ever-deepening debt.

'You stand at the crossroads of your life, young man, you must choose. You have already made one choice; you went to see your Beauséant cousin and had a taste of luxury. You went to visit Madame de Restaud, Père Goriot's daughter, and had a taste of how Parisian women live. That day you came back with a word marked on your forehead, and one I could read easily enough: *Succeed!* succeed at any price. Bravo! I said, there's a lad after my own heart.'

Related Characters: Vautrin (speaker), Père Goriot ,

Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

When Rastignac gets his first taste of high society, he thinks that he's already encountered all the temptation that Paris has to offer. Back at his shabby boarding house, though, he faces an unlikely, and even more tempting, phenomenon. His housemate, the cheerful, unassuming boarder named Vautrin, has been quietly watching Rastignac's social striving all this time and quietly intervenes to offer the young man a better deal. Vautrin explains to Rastignac that the path he's embarking upon will take time—far too much time, in fact. If Rastignac really wants to succeed, Vautrin tells him, he should avoid long years of toiling to establish a law career until he can afford to provide for a middle-class wife. Instead, he offers to find Rastignac a richly-endowed wife through much shadier but faster means, thereby fast-tracking the young man's quest for wealth and position. He plays upon Rastignac's hunger for success by arguing that society is already stacked against him and that he should refuse to play by its supposedly fair rules. Vautrin's temptation of Rastignac further illustrates the blinding allure of wealth and suggests that the idealistic and ambitious are easily corrupted by those who claim to be able to see through society's pretensions.

> 'If I have one more piece of advice for you, my pet, it is not to stick to your opinions any more firmly than to your words. When you are asked for them, sell them. A man who boasts that he never changes his opinions is a man committed always to follow a straight line, an idiot who believes in infallibility. There are no such things as principles, only events; no laws, only circumstances. Your exceptional man adjusts to events and circumstances in order to control them. If there really were fixed principles and fixed laws, nations would not keep changing them as we change our shirts.'

Related Characters: Vautrin (speaker), Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

This quote concludes Vautrin's temptation of Rastignac, and it illustrates the amoral beliefs underlying Vautrin's view of the world. Vautrin claims to operate by no other principle than his own personal advantage. He laughs at the notion of sticking to one's principles; doing so, he argues, essentially makes someone a dupe, blindly proceeding in the same direction with no allowance for changing circumstances. The only reality, Vautrin argues, is concrete circumstances, not abstract principles. And the ability to adapt to those circumstances is a mark of excellence, not weakness. Perhaps referring to France's shifting fortunes over the past quarter-century, Vautrin adds that political transformations are a further illustration of this truth. By tempting Rastignac in this way, Vautrin is trying to loosen the young student's grip on his principles and manipulate him into taking shortcuts to success. His words—and the effect they have on Rastignac, though he doesn't wholly fall for them in the end—show how morally susceptible people can become when wealth and social status become their measure of success.

> What moralists call the depths of the human heart are merely the disappointments, the involuntary reactions of self-interest. These ups and downs so often bemoaned, these sudden reversals, are quite calculated for the enhancement of our pleasures. Seeing himself well dressed, with smart gloves, smart boots, Rastignac forgot his virtuous resolution. Young people do not dare look into the mirror of their consciences when they are being tempted to do wrong, while those of riper years have already seen themselves reflected there; therein lies the difference between these two periods of human life.

Related Characters: Vautrin, Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

Balzac has a cynical opinion of the human heart: he suggests that people are fundamentally self-interested, no matter how successfully they might convince themselves otherwise. Paradoxically, this self-interest even takes the form of moralizing. When Rastignac briefly decides that he's going to ignore Vautrin's amoral path in favor of the slower, more difficult path of hard work, this ultimately just serves to amplify what he really wants, in Balzac's opinion. When Rastignac tries on his newly tailored clothes, he sees what a life in Paris society could really be like, and his vague,

theoretical commitment to virtue quickly evaporates. Balzac further suggests that the flipside of youthful idealism is that it allows young people to delude themselves about their deepest intentions. That's why Rastignac keeps changing his mind about the best way forward—he can't yet be honest with himself about the nature of his own heart, which in turn makes him a target both for manipulation (such as Vautrin's) and for manipulating others.

The student walked back from the Théâtre-Italien to the rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, his head full of the most alluring plans. He had not failed to notice how closely Madame de Restaud had observed him, both in the vicomtesse's box and in that of Madame de Nucingen, and he presumed that he would no longer find the comtesse's door closed to him. He could already count on four major contacts in the most select Parisian society [...]

'If Madame de Nucingen takes an interest in me, I will teach her how to manipulate her husband. Her husband is a very successful businessman, and he'll be able to help me make my fortune in less than no time.'

Related Characters: Eugène de Rastignac (speaker), Baron de Nucingen, Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant, Madame Delphine de Nucingen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

When Rastignac accompanies his cousin Madame de Beauséant to the theater, the outing is a huge success. He secures an introduction to the target of his romantic schemes, Madame de Nucingen—and in the process, he attracts the attention of her sister, Madame de Restaud, who'd rejected him before. This experience persuades Rastignac that he's already on the cusp of social success. The connections he's making are not only opening new doors into society but reopening ones that had previously been closed. This leads Rastignac to take an excessively optimistic view of his romantic prospects going forward. After just one conversation, he assumes that he has the skills to ingratiate himself with the wealthy Baron de Nucingen in order to start making his fortune. What Rastignac doesn't consider is that he's not really the one doing the manipulating—in time, he'll discover that he's much more at Madame de Nucingen's mercy than he realizes. This passage shows how intricately calculating Paris society can be and what a novice Rastignac really is.

'My word,' he said with seeming indifference, 'what good would it do me to live in greater comfort? I really can't explain that sort of thing; I can't put two words together properly. That's what it's all about,' he added, striking his heart. 'My life, my own life, is all in my two daughters. If they enjoy themselves, if they are happy and finely dressed, if they have carpets to walk on, what does it matter what clothes I wear or what sort of bedroom I have? I don't feel cold if they are warm. I never feel sad if they are laughing. My only sorrows are theirs.'

Related Characters: Père Goriot (speaker), Eugène de Rastignac , Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Madame Delphine de Nucingen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

When Rastignac talks with Goriot about his daughters, he learns more about Goriot's extreme devotion to the girls over the years. Goriot explains that it doesn't matter to him that he's lost most of his money by securing his daughters' marriages and helping them out of various financial difficulties. He claims to identify himself so completely with the girls' happiness that he doesn't stop to think about his own comfort or even his own emotions. In short, he doesn't have much of an existence of his own. Though Goriot is apparently sincere, this shows the degree to which he idolizes his daughters, as well as the degree to which they're all financially enslaved to a society that prizes social status over anything else. Goriot never questions whether all these things are truly necessary to his daughters' happiness or worth their mistreatment of him. For him, the important thing is being able to delude himself that the girls' affection is genuine and that they aren't simply using him.

In the course of the next few days Rastignac led an extremely dissipated life. He dined almost every day with Madame de Nucingen, and went everywhere as her escort. He would come home at three or four in the morning, rise at midday to get ready to go out, and then go for a turn in the Bois when it was fine. He wasted time like this, heedless of the cost, and absorbed all the lessons and allurements of luxury [...] He played for high stakes, losing or winning a lot of money, and finally grew used to the extravagant life of the young man in Paris.

Related Characters: Vautrin, Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

As Rastignac grows more and more infatuated with Madame de Nucingen, his original lofty ambitions for life in Paris rapidly disappear. His studies fade from his life, and the trappings of high society take their place. All his energy goes into enjoying and supporting a life of pleasure that he can't actually afford. He is biding his time, deluding himself that somehow, the de Nucingens will help him make an easy fortune. But the more Rastignac gets sucked into this lifestyle, the more the allure of wealth traps him in an unsustainable situation, and the more his ambition becomes corrupted. This is also an example of Vautrin's gradual corruption of Rastignac: Rastignac may have refused Vautrin's scheme initially, but Vautrin is banking on the likelihood that, now that Rastignac's gotten a taste of a luxurious lifestyle, he will find himself in such desperate financial straits that he'll reconsider. Vautrin is playing a long game.

Rastignac was indeed in a state of perplexity which must be familiar to many young men. Whether she really loved him or was just leading him on, Madame de Nucingen had inflicted on Rastignac all the pains of a genuine passion [...] For the past few months she had so inflamed Eugène's senses that she finally affected his inward heart. If in the initial stages of his liaison the student had believed himself to be the master, Madame de Nucingen had now gained the upper hand[.]

Related Characters: Vautrin, Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant, Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Not so long ago, Rastignac had deluded himself into believing that he would soon be manipulating Madame de Nucingen's husband into helping him gain a fortune. However, it's beginning to become apparent how thoroughly he's tricked himself. Even if his feelings for Delphine were somewhat fabricated in the beginning, that no longer matters. Delphine's doting attentions, whether fabricated in turn or genuine, have caused Rastignac to fall in love with her. In this case, calculated emotions have given way to sincerity, and the manipulator has become the manipulated. This scenario again shows what a novice Rastignac really is in the delicate social-climbing games of Parisian society. It also shows that emotions are far more unruly than either the vicomtesse or Vautrin had let on in their tutelage of Rastignac. Even if one starts out intending to use emotions as tools or weapons, one can just as easily find the weapons turned on oneself. Gaining a foothold in society is far more slippery than Rastignac had imagined.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Everyone now fully understood Vautrin, his past, present and future, his ruthless doctrines, his religion of indulging his own good pleasure, his regal authority, deriving from the cynicism of his thoughts and deeds and a power of organization applied to everything. The blood rushed to his face, his eyes glittered like those of a wildcat. He bounded up and down with such ferocious energy, he roared so fiercely, that he wrung cries of terror from all the boarders.

Related Characters: Madame Vauquer, Vautrin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Vautrin is identified as Jacques Collin, or "Death-Dodger," a ruthless criminal who's been posing as a harmless boarder. This is one of the most blatant examples of manipulation and delusion in the book. Vautrin has shown people what they wanted to see—he's an amiable, helpful neighbor to Madame Vauquer and most of the others, for example—and they have believed it. Madame Vauquer has even given Vautrin a key to the boarding house—a privilege

granted to no other boarder—simply because he makes her laugh, despite knowing almost nothing about his past or what he does all day. When Vautrin's identity is finally revealed and he's arrested, the façade drops away, and suddenly Vautrin's wickedness is obvious for all to see. However, it's hinted that all the clues were probably there all along—it's just that nobody cared to look too closely. This quote shows that, in Balzac's view, most people are willing to be manipulated by others, even complicit in the manipulation, because they're eager to believe exactly what they want, even when they have good reason to be suspicious or to doubt their own perception.

'Try and be philosophical, Ma,' Collin went on. 'Did it do you any harm being in my box at the Gaîté last night?' he exclaimed. 'Are you any better than us? The brand we bear on our shoulders is not as shameful as what you have in your hearts, flabby members of a putrid society. The best among you could not stand up to me!'

Related Characters: Vautrin (speaker), Madame Vauquer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

After Vautrin gets arrested, he takes the opportunity to make a final dramatic swipe at society in general. In doing so, he indicts the hypocrisy of average people, whom he sees as being complicit in the corruption of society as a whole. In response to Madame Vauquer's horror that she accompanied him to the theater last night, not knowing he was a criminal, Vautrin argues that Madame Vauquer—and, by implication, everyone else like her—is no better than he is. Vautrin, at least, is honest in his criminal dealings; he doesn't try to convince himself that he's a better person than he really is. But people like Madame Vauquer and the rest of the boarders, who go about their lives playing by society's rules, falsely convince themselves that they're superior to those who refuse to abide by those rules. In that way, he charges, the rest of these supposedly upstanding folks show less integrity than he does. Balzac doesn't seem to grant Vautrin's argument in the end, but he does suggest that most people spend their lives deluded about the real nature of their desires.

It was midnight. [...] Père Goriot and the student returned to the Maison Vauquer talking about Delphine with increasing fervour, each trying to outdo the other, expressing the strength of his passion in curious contention. Eugène could not deny that the father's love, unblemished by any selfish interest, left his own far behind in scope and persistence. For the father, his idol was always pure and beautiful, and his worship was intensified by all that lay in the past as well as in the future.

Related Characters: Vautrin, Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Eugène de Rastignac , Père Goriot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

After Vautrin is arrested, Rastignac is briefly convinced that he will remain on the narrow path of virtue. But when Goriot whisks him off to dinner with Delphine, it doesn't take long for Rastignac's resolve to be shaken once again. On the way home, Delphine's would-be lover and father can't stop talking about her—it's as if they're trying to convince themselves and each other that their passion for Delphine is unshakeable, while subconsciously suspecting that it isn't reciprocated by her. It's another illustration of the self-perpetuating game that people must maintain in this society: spending all their resources in pursuit of a prize which they suspect, deep down, ultimately won't deliver on its promises. In that way, Delphine represents Rastignac's quest for social success, and for Goriot, she represents the tireless strivings of fatherhood. Rastignac sees that Goriot's passion is undeniably stronger, something that will remain true until his death.

By enjoying the material advantages of wealth, as he had so long enjoyed the moral advantages of noble birth, he had sloughed off his skin as a provincial, and smoothly moved into a position from which he could look forward to a fine future. So, as he waited for Delphine, seated comfortably in this charming boudoir, which he was beginning to regard as almost his own, he saw himself so far removed from the Rastignac who had come to Paris the year before, that, looking closely at that person through some trick of mental vision, he asked himself if at that moment there was any resemblance between his two selves.

Related Characters: Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Rastignac has been torn between his sense of integrity and his desire to pursue a quicker, easier path to social success. For every small advance he makes in his social quest, it seems that he is held back by the lingering desire for virtue, left over from his hardworking youth on his family's provincial estate. However, when Rastignac finally obtains an irrefutable symbol of success—an apartment in Delphine de Nucingen's home—his remaining attachment to his past seems to have been obscured. It's as if this material prize—rather like the new, fashionable wardrobe he bought at the beginning of the novel—persuades him that he's no longer a pretender in society and truly belongs there. It even seems as if the Rastignac who first arrived in Paris, not the man he is now, was the illusion. This quote thus illustrates how wealth corrupts ambition and deepens self-delusion in a society that rewards external status instead of real virtue.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ Today I have only one fear, I can imagine only one disaster, and that would be to lose the love which has made me glad to be alive. Apart from that love, nothing matters, nothing else in the world means anything to me. You are everything to me. If I enjoy being rich, it is to enable me to give you more pleasure. I am, to my shame, more lover than daughter. Why? I don't know. My whole life is in you. My father gave me a heart, but you made it beat. The whole world may condemn me, what do I care?

Related Characters: Madame Delphine de Nucingen (speaker), Eugène de Rastignac , Père Goriot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

Before Goriot's death, Rastignac tries to convince Delphine to rush to his bedside, but his pleas fall on deaf ears. Here, Delphine confesses that her only real passion, her only genuine emotions, revolve around Rastignac. Even though Rastignac is dismayed by Delphine's seeming indifference to her father's suffering, and he even suspects that she's merely flattering him, he can't help feeling moved by her profession of love, showing how helplessly mired they both are in a society fueled by superficial expressions of emotion. Interestingly, Delphine's words are reminiscent of her father's attitude. She claims that the chief joys afforded by wealth are opportunities to make Rastignac happy—much as Goriot has convinced himself that his daughters' happiness is all he needs to be happy. It's as if this is what love has come to mean to Delphine: she has acknowledged an artificial version for so long that she no longer recognizes the absence of the real thing.

❝ He saw society as an ocean of mire into which one had only to dip a toe to be buried in it up to the neck. 'The only crimes committed there are petty ones!' he said to himself. 'Vautrin was a bigger man than that.' [...] In his thoughts he returned to the bosom of his family. He remembered the pure emotions of that tranquil life, he recalled days spent among those who held him dear. By following the natural laws of hearth and home, those dear creatures found complete, unbroken, untroubled happiness. Despite such worthy thoughts, he did not feel bold enough to go to Delphine and confess the faith of pure souls by bidding her follow Virtue in the name of Love.

Related Characters: Eugène de Rastignac (speaker), Vautrin, Père Goriot , Madame Delphine de Nucingen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

Despite Delphine's repeated flattery of him and his own social achievements, Rastignac is not totally corrupted by the end of the novel. On some level, after witnessing Goriot's daughters' failure of loyalty, he recognizes that Parisian society as a whole is morally bankrupt. He even pines for the relative peace, genuine affection, and moral purity of his rural upbringing—an upbringing from which he was once eager to distance himself. His reminiscences about his family are certainly idealized, but that isn't the point. Rather, Rastignac recognizes that Parisian society uniquely incentivizes fake, manipulative emotions. This is further shown by his musings about Vautrin: Vautrin may have been a criminal, in other words, but at least he was honest about who he was. Yet Rastignac's acquaintances in Paris live superficial, self-serving lives revolving around wealth, and they convince themselves that they are honest and deserving of others' admiration. As he acknowledges,

even dipping a toe into the mire seems to taint his entire existence. Even knowing this, he is similarly infatuated with the shallow satisfactions of society and has to muster the moral strength to resist them.

Rastignac left at about five o'clock, after seeing Madame de Beauséant into her travelling-coach and receiving her tearful farewell [...] It was cold and damp as Eugène walked back to the Maison Vauquer. His education was almost complete.

'I shan't be able to save poor Père Goriot,' Bianchon said to him as Rastignac came into his neighbour's room.

'My friend,' said Eugène, after a look at the sleeping old man, 'stay on the path that leads to the modest goal you have been content to set yourself. As for me, I am in hell, and must stay there.'

Related Characters: Bianchon, Eugène de Rastignac (speaker), Père Goriot , Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

The juxtaposition of Goriot's death and Madame de Beauséant's disappearance into the countryside is intentional on Balzac's part. After learning that her lover is getting married—the last person in Paris to discover this humiliating fact, and doing so on the eve of throwing the biggest party of the season—the vicomtesse decides to retire into obscurity. She is unwilling to subject herself to society's judgment any longer by playing the game of displaying calculated emotions. Meanwhile, Goriot's death (after discovering his daughters' unhappiness and disloyalty and his inability to help them) is an example of an attempt to escape unfixable circumstances in its own way. Rastignac sees both the vicomtesse and Goriot as noble people for whom society has no clear room; their integrity cannot survive its inflexible, crushing demands. Rastignac sees no such hope for himself. This is what's behind his comments to Bianchon—the only way to avoid being corrupted by this society, in other words, is never to buy into its demands in the first place.

'They are busy, they are sleeping, they won't come. I knew it. You have to be dying to learn what children are. Ah! my friend, don't get married, don't have children! You give them life, they give you death. You bring them into the world, they drive you out of it. No, they won't come! For ten years I have known how it would be. I sometimes said so to myself, but I didn't dare to believe it.'

Related Characters: Père Goriot (speaker), Madame Delphine de Nucingen , Madame Anastasie de Restaud , Eugène de Rastignac

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his life, Goriot alternates between cursing his daughters' disloyalty, lamenting his own enabling of their selfishness, and praising and praying for his beloved children. This quote is the one portion of his final monologue that squarely admits the twisted nature of their relationship. He tells Rastignac that parenthood is ultimately a thankless exchange—he's only gotten death in exchange for the love, effort, and money he's poured into Anastasie and Delphine. On some level, he's always known this, but only now does he acknowledge it.

Yet it's questionable whether Goriot fully recognizes the scope of the problem. He doesn't acknowledge that the fundamental flaw in his relationship with his daughters is that he equated their happiness with their social position—the fatal flaw of Parisian society as a whole. By accepting that lie, he allowed his entire conception of fatherhood to be twisted beyond recognition, costing him his own wellbeing in the process. Ultimately, even this limited acknowledgement of the truth fades from Goriot's consciousness, as he believes that Rastignac and Bianchon are his daughters, faithful to him at last. In this way Balzac suggests that human relationships are inevitably, thoroughly corrupted in a society like status-obsessed Paris.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: A FAMILY BOARDING HOUSE

For 30 years, Madame Vauquer has run a family boarding house, the Maison Vauquer, in the rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève. It is a respectable establishment. In 1819, when the story begins, a poor young woman is living there—the first to reside there in decades.

The novel's Paris setting is established from the outset—particularly its setting in a lower-class neighborhood, which will contrast with the wealthier society highlighted later. But the residence of a young woman in the Maison Vauquer—her significance otherwise a mystery so far—is proof of the boarding house's respectability.

The narrator suggests that this story will be difficult to understand for anyone who is outside of Paris. The particular setting in Paris is a valley between Montmartre and Montrouge, a place characterized by worn plaster and such a hectic pace of life that lasting emotions are seldom produced here. The narrator further asserts that "all is true" in this story and that its elements can be recognized in the reader's heart or social circle.

Balzac's fiction is meant to delve deeply into the character of 19th-century Paris—especially the material decline of particular neighborhoods and, in Balzac's view, the emotional superficiality of its citizens. The quote "all is true" was originally included in English, and it's from Shakespeare's Henry VIII *(1613). Its inclusion is meant to convey the idea that although* Père Goriot*'s setting and plot are specific, the underlying themes of the story are universal.*

This neighborhood of Paris is obscure, dull, and characterized by poverty. The Maison Vauquer itself overlooks a little garden; in front stands a gate with a noisy bell attached. The building is three stories high, constructed of yellow-painted stone. Inside is a depressing-looking drawing room with worn china, artificial flowers, and a marble clock in poor taste. The room also gives off a stuffy, unpalatable "boarding house smell." The dining room is even worse, with rickety furnishings, ugly prints, and a greasy tablecloth. "Squalor," the narrator concludes, "may not yet have taken over, but there are patches of it."

The Maison Vauquer and its surroundings are not, on the surface, particularly interesting or desirable places. Yet the intricate details Balzac supplies create a sense of interest, as well as the expectation that the Maison Vauquer must be populated by characters worth knowing about—even if the place itself is run-down and unappealing. Once again, the "squalor" of the setting contrasts with more upscale parts of Paris to be introduced later.

Every morning at about seven o'clock, Madame Vauquer appears in the dining room. She is middle-aged, plump, pale, and somehow a match for the boarding house. She looks like a representative of all women who have faced hard times in life. Her boarders, though, believe that she is a good-hearted woman.

Madame Vauquer is a reflection of her rather nondescript and run-down surroundings. Yet Balzac upholds her as a character worthy of description and interest, suggesting that so-called shabbiness doesn't detract from a person's value.

Currently, there are seven resident boarders. On the first floor, in the two best apartments, live Madame Vauquer and her friend Madame Couture, another widow. Madame Couture acts as a mother figure to a young girl—the one referred to earlier—named Victorine Taillefer. Upstairs, there is an elderly boarder named Poiret and another, about age 40, who wears a wig, dyes his whiskers, and goes by Monsieur Vautrin. On the third floor live an elderly spinster named Mademoiselle Michonneau and, finally, a retired manufacturer of vermicelli (Italian pasta) who goes by Père Goriot.

The Maison Vauquer houses people of a range of ages and backgrounds, all of whom will figure in the plot, though their relationships and relative prominence aren't yet made clear. The name Père Goriot has sometimes been translated as "old Goriot," but, in keeping with the novel's theme of fatherhood, it's best understood to mean "father Goriot."

Another room is taken by a young law student named Eugène de Rastignac. He has come to Paris from Angoulême, at great cost to his large family. Raised in relative poverty, he is used to hard work and hopes to begin a career that will meet his parents' expectations of him. He is also eager to enter upon the Paris social scene.

Inspired by this novel, the name "Rastignac" has sometimes been used to refer to an eager social climber. Young Rastignac is ambitious and idealistic—characteristics that Paris will put to the test. His poor, provincial family and their expectations weigh heavily on him, making him vulnerable to the allure of wealth and the corruptions it brings with it.


In the attic apartments live Christophe, who does odd jobs, and Sylvie, the cook. In addition to the boarders, law or medical students frequently sign up just for meals. The regular seven boarders, however, are like Madame Vauquer's children, and she gives them attention and respect in accordance with how much they pay. The boarders are generally dressed in threadbare, patched clothes, but they are solidly built and toughened by experience.

There is a humorous note in the description of Madame Vauquer's maternal relationship with her boarders, suggesting that there is a transactional aspect to most parent-child relationships. This can be compared, later, with Victorine's relationship with her father and Père Goriot's with his daughters.


Mademoiselle Michonneau is a skeletal-looking elderly lady with a menacing expression and a shrill voice, though she might once have been pretty, and many wonder about her youth. Monsieur Poiret is a shriveled, shaky-legged old man with the appearance of having suffered. Most of Paris is oblivious to places like the Maison Vauquer and the sufferings of its inhabitants.

Balzac takes care to describe and tell the stories of characters who are traditionally overlooked, including those who don't have a place in Paris's higher society and whose role in the story is itself marginal. He suggests that each has an indispensable part to play, regardless of their class status.

Two figures stand out from the crowd of boarders. Though Victorine Taillefer is fragile and melancholy, she still has a certain youthfulness, and if she were happy, she might be beautiful. Her story is sad: her father has disowned her, intending to leave his estate to Victorine's brother instead. A widowed relative of Victorine's dead mother, Madame Couture cares for Victorine as if she were her own daughter. Both are devout Catholics. Each year, Victorine goes to her father's house to ask for mercy, but each time he shuts the **door** in her face.

Victorine's tragic past, vulnerable financial position, and innocence appear to make her susceptible to manipulation by others. She is at the mercy of those around her, particularly in the disposal of her rightful wealth, showing how wealth can be an oppressive tool in the hands of the more powerful. Victorine's relationship with her father will also contrast with that of Goriot and his daughters.



Eugène de Rastignac is a fair-skinned, dark-haired Southerner of noble bearing. He dresses thriftily but not inelegantly. Vautrin is about 40 years old, well-muscled with broad shoulders. He has a hard, lined face, but a friendly manner and a good-humored attitude. Vautrin is handy and likes to be of use to people in the boarding house, even lending them money at times. He has a certain coldness about him, though. He disappears from the boarding house for most of the day, getting in after midnight using a key given to him by Madame Vauquer, who trusts him. Most people sense that there's more to Vautrin than meets the eye, but they don't ask too many questions. In fact, the boarders generally say little to one another and are fairly indifferent to one another's sufferings, knowing that they're powerless to relieve them. Madame Vauquer, presiding over her boarders, is by far the happiest of them all.

Vautrin is the novel's main example of a character whose appearance is deceiving—making him a prime candidate for corrupting and betraying others. He is kind and helpful enough to win others' trust, but his secretiveness implies that there's more to him than his jovial exterior suggests. Because everyone in the boarding house has a complicated past of some sort, none of them are too eager to pry into anyone else's.

Among the boarders, there's one who is the butt of everyone's jokes: Père Goriot. The retired pasta-maker is about 69 years old. When he first moved into the boarding house several years ago, he occupied one of the bigger apartments and boasted a large wardrobe and a handsome collection of household silver. When Madame Vauquer learned Monsieur Goriot's income, she began to have ideas about him. He's handsome enough, so she began to daydream about selling the boarding house and becoming a respectable wife.

When Goriot first came to the boarding house, he was better off financially than he currently is—even passably wealthy, enough to tempt the worldly-wise Madame Vauquer. This suggests that just within the past few years, he has lost his financial standing somehow—something that people in Paris constantly fear and which has devastating social consequences, as the novel explores.

Madame Vauquer begins distributing fliers boasting about the Maison Vauquer's charms, hoping to bring in more high-class clients. She gains Madame la Comtesse de l'Ambermesnil, a 36-year-old widow, and the two become friends. The Comtesse approves of Madame Vauquer's intentions toward Goriot, and she helps her friend shop for a more attractive wardrobe. However, she secretly wants to steal Goriot for herself, and when he rebuffs her, the Comtesse stormily moves out, neglecting to pay six months' rent.

Madame Vauquer's experience with her new friend, the Comtesse de l'Ambermesnil, illustrates how cutthroat the process of fighting for social standing can be. Though the story of the two women's ill-fated friendship is humorous, it also suggests that ambitious grasping for wealth tends to corrupt human relationships, making people susceptible to betrayal.

After this incident, Madame Vauquer blames everybody but herself—especially Goriot. She decides that Goriot must already be involved with someone else, and her disappointment fuels her hatred of him. She has to treat her boarder with outward respect, so she comes up with petty ways of getting back at Goriot, like cutting luxuries out of his dinner menu. He's already a frugal man by habit, so instead, Madame Vauquer starts making fun of him with the other boarders. She begins to wonder why a man with such nice clothes and silver boards in a modest house like hers.

Madame Vauquer suffers the consequences of her calculating behavior toward Goriot, but Goriot himself gets the worse end of it, as both Madame Vauquer and the other boarders begin making him the butt of their jokes—suggesting that such behavior has a toxic effect on relationships and societal harmony in general.

At the end of his second year in the house, Goriot moves to a cheaper second-floor room and stops lighting a fire in the winter. At this point, Madame Vauquer stops calling him Monsieur and just starts calling him Père Goriot. Nobody knows why Goriot starts economizing, but they assume that he must simply be a rogue or a rascal. The other boarders speculate that he's a gambler, a spy, or a miser.

In 19th-century Parisian society (where the novel is set), a person's worth is associated with their wealth, which in turn is displayed in their outward lifestyle. A person's social status is also expressed through the titles which others use for them or decline to use. Here, Goriot is no longer thought to be worth the title "Monsieur," but the less respectful "father."

The rumor that people accept as most likely, however, is Madame Vauquer's claim that Goriot is a libertine. A few months after the episode with the Comtesse, Madame Vauquer sees an elegant young blond lady in a silk dress going into Goriot's room. At dinner, when she asks about his visitor, Goriot proudly says that the woman was his daughter. A month later, the woman returns, and a few days later, a shapely brunette begins visiting him. Because of the variety of outfits worn by both women, Madame Vauquer and Sylvie, who are closely watching all this, fail to recognize that it's just two different women, and they assume that Goriot has multiple mistresses.

People jump to the worst possible conclusion about Goriot's decline in fortunes, a further illustration of the precarious nature of reputation in status-obsessed Paris. People don't even believe his claim to be the wealthy women's father—they assume that he must be supporting various mistresses. The fact that it's actually just two women (whom the gossipers fail to recognize) is a humorous indictment of people's readiness to believe the worst.

By the third year, Goriot moves up to the still cheaper third floor, stops powdering his hair, and looks more troubled. His fine clothing and jewels begin to gradually disappear, and he becomes wrinkled and gaunt. The boarders sometimes tease him about the apparent disappearance of his female callers, but they don't ask questions otherwise. By the end of November 1819, the boarders share the general opinion that Goriot has never had a wife or daughter; he is simply a debauched old man.

As the story catches up to the present day, Goriot's fortunes have decidedly sunk. Whatever the reason for Goriot's decline, it has worsened year after year and can't be concealed in his deteriorating appearance and living conditions. The other boarders take his condition at face value and assume that his appearance is simply a reflection of his moral corruption.

After Rastignac's first year of schooling in Paris, he returns home for vacation, and he is struck for the first time by his family's financial straits. He realizes that the family's future comfort depends on him, and this inflames his ambition. But he also recognizes that success depends on social contacts, and that social advancement depends on one's relationships with women. Rastignac's aunt, Madame de Marcillac, gives him a letter of introduction to distant cousin Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant. The vicomtesse then invites Rastignac to a ball.

The narrative shifts to Rastignac, who, alongside Goriot, will occupy a central place in the narrative. Rastignac's comparison of Paris and his family home shows that ambition often has sympathetic roots—in this case, the desire to help one's family. However, because financial improvement depends upon social contacts, ambition will prove to be a manipulative force as well.

Rastignac arrives home from the ball long after midnight and ostensibly sits up studying, but he keeps thinking over his introduction to Parisian nobility. At the ball, a young woman named Comtesse Anastasie de Restaud caught his eye. To Rastignac, she is the ideal lady. While they danced, he managed to get invited to her house. Rastignac's daydreams of future success distract him from his studies. He wanders into the hallway and notices a light beneath Père Goriot's **door**. When he peeks through the keyhole, he sees Goriot twisting a silver dish and bowl into ingots. Tears run down Goriot's face. Rastignac wonders if the old man is some sort of criminal, but he decides to keep quiet about what he's seen.

After being introduced to the Parisian nobility, Rastignac's distraction from his studies hints at what his world will become in the months ahead: he will likely neglect the professional ambition that initially brought him to Paris in favor of trying to obtain new social standing based on his relationships with wealthy women. Though Rastignac doesn't yet know the connection, Goriot's misfortune will play a direct role in Rastignac's attempt to claw his own way into Parisian society.

The next morning, there's such a dense fog darkening the city that Madame Vauquer oversleeps. When she comes downstairs, Vautrin has just come in, and he reports that he just saw Goriot selling his silver at the goldsmith's. After that, he says, Goriot went into the moneylender Gobseck's place. Apparently, he was paying off a debt. Just then, Goriot himself enters, and he sends Christophe on a secretive errand to Madame de Restaud's. It seems that Goriot was paying off *her* debt.

The mystery surrounding Goriot deepens—why is he in such desperate need of money, and what is his connection to the wealthy Madame de Restaud, with whom Rastignac is smitten? Though the answer to these questions are yet unclear, it's significant that Goriot is seemingly selling off all of his valuables to pay for Madame de Restaud's debts. This again shows that the other boarders' judgment and ridicule of him is cruel and unfair, as Goriot's decline seems to a self-sacrificial one on behalf of another person.

When Madame Couture and Victorine join the breakfast crowd, having just come from Mass, Victorine is shaking with fear over her impending visit to her father's. Everyone sympathizes with the young girl. Vautrin offhandedly mentions that soon, he will intervene in Victorine's affairs and make everything better. When Rastignac comes in and begins talking about last night's ball, Victorine glances shyly at him. When Rastignac mentions having met Anastasie de Restaud, Goriot looks up in surprise, and everyone else notices his interest. They gossip about it after Goriot leaves the table. His curiosity peaked, Rastignac resolves to visit Madame Restaud tomorrow.

Vautrin's remark to Victorine is rather prophetic, though nobody realizes this yet. More obvious are Victorine's feelings for Rastignac, but everyone takes more notice of Goriot's strange preoccupation with Madame de Restaud. Rastignac seizes upon this mystery as an excuse to pursue the lady he so admires. In all these events, sincere emotions—like Victorine's—tend to be overshadowed by intrigue and calculated social jockeying.

That evening, Victorine is red-eyed with grief—her father, Madame Couture explains, once again resisted Victorine's heartfelt pleas for mercy. Listening to the story, Goriot wonders if Taillefer and his son are "monsters." Over dinner, he sadly watches Victorine's face.

Goriot's pondering about the callous Taillefer, who coldly rejects his daughter, implies that loyalty to one's family is deeply important to Goriot—a value that is seemingly lacking among others in Parisian society.

The next afternoon Rastignac dresses elegantly and heads off to visit Madame de Restaud. When he gets to her house, he notices the servants' scornful looks because he didn't arrive in a carriage. He also sees an extravagant carriage sitting in the courtyard, led by a fine horse. As Rastignac is led into Madame de Restaud's salon, he hears Père Goriot's voice and watches him leave. Another young man, Maxime, is also waiting to be admitted to the salon.

In his initial foray into high society, Rastignac quickly discovers that the external markers of wealth—like what kind of carriage one drives—are highly consequential, marking one out as worthy of notice and respect or scorn and rejection.

When Madame de Restaud greets both men, Maxime gives her a look that clearly conveys his desire for Rastignac to leave. Rastignac immediately feels hatred toward his rival and wants to defeat him. But But before their conversation gets underway, another man interrupts—it's Comte Monsieur de Restaud. When Madame de Restaud introduces Rastignac as a relative of the vicomtesse, Maxime looks at him with new respect. While Maxime and Madame de Restaud chat in private, Rastignac flatters Monsieur de Restaud, hoping to stay long enough to learn more about Madame and her relationship to Père Goriot. He finds her mysteriously compelling and hopes to gain power over her.

Rastignac is further initiated into Parisian society as he learns that romantic triangles are taken for granted—here, Madame de Restaud's husband and her lover, Maxime, are acquainted with one another and apparently under no illusions about Madame's relationship with each of them. Meanwhile, Rastignac begins trying to gain a social foothold by establishing his own relationship with Madame.

When Madame de Restaud rejoins Rastignac and Monsieur de Restaud, Rastignac brings up his neighbor, Père Goriot. When he says "Père," the Monsieur de Restaud is shocked: "you might have said *Monsieur*," he corrects Rastignac. Madame looks embarrassed and changes the subject. As his hostess begins playing the piano, Rastignac ponders the contrasting effects of the names "Madame de Beauséant" and "Père Goriot." He feels humiliated. After he leaves the room, Monsieur de Restaud instructs his servant that anytime Rastignac shows up, he's to be told that nobody is home.

Rastignac thinks that he has an easy point of connection with Madame de Restaud, but he bungles it by unthinkingly using the wrong title—the familiar "Père" instead of the more formal "Monsieur"—for Goriot. He doesn't know it now, but the mere mention of Goriot is itself an embarrassment to Goriot's daughter and wealthy son-in-law. Rastignac's mistake shows him that realizing his social ambitions won't be as easy as he'd thought.

Emerging outside in the rain, Rastignac knows that he's given offense, but he doesn't know how bad the damage is. His coat and hat are also getting wet, and he realizes that he'll need an entirely new wardrobe in order to move within aristocratic society. When a cabby stops for him, Rastignac decides to visit his cousin the vicomtesse for advice. When he isn't sure of the Hôtel de Beauséant's address, he feels like even the cabby is laughing at him.

Rastignac is a picture of social failure—he's been ejected from someone's house on his first attempt to ingratiate himself, he doesn't have the right clothes, he doesn't know how to use the right titles, and he doesn't even know where he's going. Because he arrives in Paris lacking the right social tools, he is limited in how far he can go toward realizing his ambitions.

At his cousin's, Rastignac sees an elaborate nobleman's carriage, much fancier than the cab and even Maxime's carriage. Though Rastignac doesn't know much about his cousin, the vicomtesse has been having an affair with a Portuguese nobleman named the Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto. Her husband, the vicomte, knows about it and, unlike Monsieur de Restaud with his wife and Maxime, he doesn't get involved. Despite his happy relationship with the vicomtesse, the Marquis has decided to marry a woman named Mademoiselle de Rochefide. The vicomtesse is the only person in Paris high society who doesn't know this. Rastignac arrives just before the Marquis intends to break the news to the vicomtesse, to the Marquis's relief.

In Paris high society, superficial marriages and entangling affairs are commonplace. In Rastignac's cousin's case, there's not even an attempt to hide the fact that she's cheating on her husband. Conversely, her lover, the marquis, shrinks from telling her that he's pursuing a conventional marriage that will destabilize their affair. As Rastignac is initiated into this strange world, he begins to understand that human relationships in high society are marked by calculation rather than genuine affection.

As Rastignac watches the vicomtesse's and the marquis's goodbye, he feels envious of the luxury surrounding the couple, and dizzied by the wealth he must amass in order to compete in this society. Though the Vicomtesse feels ominous about the Marquis's departure, she finally turns her attention to Rastignac. Rastignac explains that he needs his cousin to be a "fairy godmother" and to help him understand Paris life. Just then, the servant announces a new visitor, Madame la Duchesse de Langeais, and when Rastignac makes a gesture of impatience, the vicomtesse warns him he must learn not to express his feelings so openly.

Rastignac continues to recognize that, lacking wealth and status, he is at already at a disadvantage in this society. He must rely on others' intercession to help him get a head start. The first lesson the vicomtesse gives him is that sincerity—the open expression of emotion—isn't valued in high society. One's true feelings (and, to some extent, one's true self) must remain buried if social advancement is one's goal.

The Duchesse de Langeais, with wounding abruptness, tells the vicomtesse that tomorrow, the wedding banns between d'Ajuda-Pinto and Mademoiselle de Rochefide are going to be published. The vicomtesse turns pale but laughs off this news as a rumor. She turns her attention back to Rastignac, giving him a warm look contrasting with the cold appraisal of the duchesse. Rastignac describes his experience with Madame de Restaud, her husband, and her lover. The vicomtesse explains that Madame de Restaud really *is* Goriot's daughter—that Goriot is crazy about both his daughters, even though they barely acknowledge him. His second daughter, Delphine de Nucingen, is married to a German baron.

The vicomtesse immediately gives Rastignac a lesson in emotional concealment as she hides her feelings about her friend's news. At the same time, she seems to be genuinely warm toward Rastignac, perhaps because she doesn't have anything to gain from him. Society also exerts pressure on family relationships, not just romantic ones. Goriot's daughters occupy a social class that no longer has room for a retired, working-class man like him.

The vicomtesse explains that Père Goriot is a good father who gave five or six thousand francs to ensure that his daughters could marry well and be happy, while keeping back only a trivial amount for himself to live on. In doing so, he believed that he would ensure two comfortable homes in which to retire, but within two years, both of his sons-in-law had banished him from their homes. This story fills the idealistic Rastignac's eyes with tears.

Goriot, acting according to social norms, tried to do what he believed was best for his daughters' happiness, while also—he thought—providing for his own comfort. But those same social norms have now undercut his relationships with his daughters.

The duchesse recalls that during the Revolution, Goriot had made a fortune selling wheat at a premium. His only passion was his daughters. At first, after marrying both girls off, his sons-in-law didn't mind him. But after the Bourbon Restoration, Goriot's Revolutionary background became an embarrassment to both. The daughters initially tried to please both their father and their husbands, inviting Goriot to visit while they were home alone. But, the duchesse observes, "genuine feelings are neither blind nor stupid," so Goriot surely knew that his daughters were ashamed. He decided to sacrifice himself by staying away.

Political circumstances have complicated Goriot's relationship with his daughters. During the period of relative peace and prosperity known as the Bourbon Restoration, association with the Revolutionary upheavals of the 1790s—not to mention a working-class background like Goriot's—is seen as socially compromising. No matter how his daughters pretend otherwise, Goriot sees through their efforts to accommodate him, and he removes himself from the picture for the sake of their continued social success.

After the duchesse leaves, the vicomtesse muses that there is always a friend who's ready to stick a dagger in you when you've suffered a misfortune. Then, she tells Rastignac that she will help him. She tells him that the more calculating he is, the more he'll succeed. People are just "post horses" to be used and abandoned at each stage on the way to success. Rastignac must find a rich young woman who will take an interest in him. Nevertheless, he must not reveal any genuine emotions to her; if he does, he'll be lost.

The vicomtesse's curt advice to Rastignac seems to be fueled, in part, by the duchesse's news of her lover's betrayal. In other words, the vicomtesse does have genuine feelings for her lover, and now she's suffering the emotional cost—and the social shame—of having indulged them. It's better, she tells her young pupil, to use people and then cast them aside. It seems that in the world of the novel, social success and genuine human feelings can't coexist.

The vicomtesse explains that the two sisters are also locked in a rivalry. Because her husband is in the French nobility, Madame de Restaud has been presented at Court and enjoys social acceptance, while Madame de Nucingen, married to a German, does not, though she is very rich. De Nucingen is therefore terribly jealous of her sister, and she would do anything to be admitted to the vicomtesse's salon. Her present lover, de Marsay, has not helped her to reach that goal. If Rastignac introduces Madame de Nucingen to the vicomtesse, Rastignac will be adored. The vicomtesse advises Rastignac to "love her afterwards if you can, otherwise just use her." Père Goriot will introduce Rastignac to Delphine, and Rastignac will quickly find himself sought-after and successful.

The vicomtesse offers Rastignac a straightforward formula for gaining social acceptance. He must exploit the sisters' rivalry to his own advantage by using his family connection to the vicomtesse to help Madame de Nucingen ascend socially. Ideally, this will also help Rastignac himself rise socially by extension. The entire process is transactional, rather than being based on real emotions. The vicomtesse even encourages Rastignac to cast Madame de Nucingen aside after he's gotten what he wants. Realizing his social ambitions will depend on his willingness to use others.

When Rastignac gets home, he is struck by the contrast between the two wealthy homes he has just visited and the shabbiness of the boarding house. His ambition intensifies, and he resolves to become both a skilled lawyer and a fashionable man. The narrator observes that Rastignac is "still very much a child." At dinner, when Rastignac speaks up in Père Goriot's defense, the other boarders' usual mockery of the old man is silenced.

Witnessing wealth and luxury firsthand inflames Rastignac's ambition further. Now that he's seen what's possible, he is no longer satisfied with what he has. At this point, though, he continues to believe that he can balance his initial professional ambition with securing a place in society. The narrator's comment that Rastignac is "still very much a child" suggests that this belief will be challenged.

After dinner, Rastignac writes a passionate letter to his mother. He explains that he's in a position to become wealthy quickly. He must therefore obtain a large loan from her, though he cannot tell her why. Rastignac promises that he is neither gambling nor in debt, but that he must find the means to make his way in Paris's high society. He urges his mother, for the sake of the family's future comfort, to sell some of her jewelry if need be.

Rastignac gets started on using and manipulating others right away. He plays on his mother's fears, affection, and desire for security in order to get the resources he needs to attempt his climb in society. It remains to be seen whether, like Goriot's daughters, Rastignac will sever the bond after it's been of use to him.

Rastignac also writes letters to his sisters, asking them to send their meager savings, and to do it secretly. As he appeals to their sense of honor, he knows that they'll willingly sacrifice for him. Rastignac feels a twinge of shame as he finishes these letters, knowing that the girls will innocently delight in doing this for him.

Rastignac's conscience bothers him about the way he's using his sisters, showing that he hasn't yet reconciled to the price of social acceptance. His vague appeal to honor is a betrayal of their naïve innocence.

In the following days, Rastignac returns to Madame de Restaud's house several times, but she never lets him in. By now, he is neglecting his law studies, only showing up for long enough to answer the roll-call at each lecture. He figures he can learn law at the last minute, just before his exams.

Ironically, in his determination to succeed socially, Rastignac is now distracted from the academic discipline it will take to achieve professional success—the original reason he came to Paris.

Before attempting to befriend Delphine de Nucingen, Rastignac gathers more information about her father. Before the Revolution, Jean-Joachim Goriot was simply an enterprising pasta-maker. When the Revolution occurred, Goriot became president of his section in order to gain protection for his business. During the subsequent grain shortage, he accumulated a small fortune—he was very good at his trade. In everything else, Goriot was a fairly dull, uncultured man. He adored his wife, who left him a widower after seven years. At that point, he transferred his affections to his two daughters.

Goriot is, in a different way from Rastignac, a very ambitious man. It's just that his ambitions have been channeled not toward social success, but toward his daughters' happiness. Instead of taking advantage of social connections, he took advantage of the Revolutionary upheavals in order to establish himself financially.("President of his section" refers to the leadership of the local branch of the Revolution in the 1790s.) Ambition, in other words, might look different among different classes, but it's universal.

As his daughters grew up, Goriot's only desire was to make them happy. He paid for the best education and treated the girls like nobility. He gave them whatever they asked for, only asking for affection in return. Goriot also let each of them choose her husband, receiving half his fortune as a dowry. Because Anastasie wanted to enter the aristocracy, she chose Monsieur de Restaud. Because Delphine loved money, she chose the Baron de Nucingen, a German banker. Goriot's daughters and his new sons-in-law were appalled when Goriot continued practicing his trade. By the time he finally retired and settled at Madame Vauquer's, his daughters were no longer seeing him.

Goriot's foremost ambition is winning his daughters' affection—no matter what it costs him personally. And it's very costly, because the girls cannot reconcile their newfound position in life—which their father faithfully helped provide for them—with Goriot's continued status as a tradesman. His daughters' ambition (social status and wealth) comes at the cost of his (their love). In this society, family bonds are often a casualty of social success.

CHAPTER 2: ENTRY ON THE SOCIAL SCENE

Rastignac receives letters from his mother and eldest sister. His mother has sent the biggest sum she can and begs him to make good use of it, because she can give no more in secrecy. Rastignac's letter has filled his mother with dread, and she warns her son that "crooked paths do not lead to greatness." His aunt Marcillac, she adds, has even sacrificed keepsakes in order to send more money. She closes by reminding Rastignac that he must succeed; they have sacrificed too much for him to do otherwise.

Rastignac successfully plays on his family's emotions and ideals in order to get what he needs from them. His mother correctly perceives that Rastignac has embarked on a questionable scheme of some sort and that it won't take him where he wants to go. Already, Rastignac's ambition is leading him to manipulate others' emotions—even his own family's.

After reading this letter, Rastignac cries. His mother's words make him think of Père Goriot flattening out his silver in order to pay off a debt for his daughter, and he feels remorseful. The letter from his sister Laure reports how she and Agathe, their other sister, joyfully emptied their savings for his sake. Rastignac takes the money and immediately hires a tailor. The prospect of new clothes temporarily erases all his doubts; his confidence and ambition are renewed.

Rastignac's tears show that he still has a conscience. He recognizes that he's no better than Goriot's daughters, who've taken advantage of their father and then cast him off. Yet he's still a flawed human being—the allure of dressing in the style of a wealthier Parisian, looking the part of a high society man, effectively stifles his briefly awakened conscience.

Vautrin has been closely watching Rastignac lately, though Rastignac isn't sure why. One morning, he impulsively follows Vautrin out of breakfast and into the boarding house garden, determined to learn what's on his mind. At first sounding hostile, Vautrin soon takes on a paternal air toward the younger man, and in spite of his irritation, Rastignac is intrigued. Vautrin begins by telling Rastignac about himself: he says that he simply does what he likes and is good to those who are good to him. But he's hostile to those who mistreat him, and he has no qualms about killing when he has to; he is experienced at dueling and has survived a bullet-wound.

The aloof Vautrin expresses a fatherly interest in Rastignac. His approach to life sounds as cynical as Madame de Beauséant's, and perhaps even more so. The vicomtesse urges Rastignac to use people for his own purposes and then abandon them, though she seems to feel genuine concern for him. Vautrin, for his part, is even content to kill anyone who gets in the way of what he wants, and it seems this attitude should put Rastignac on his guard.

There are only two choices in life, Vautrin says: obedience and revolt. Vautrin does not obey anyone. Vautrin turns to considering Rastignac's situation. He seems to know all about Rastignac's family and their meager financial situation, as well as Rastignac's ambitions. That's why Rastignac is studying law, he knows, despite the fact that it's dull and time-consuming. Rastignac's best case scenario, Vautrin goes on, will be to get a thankless position in some provincial court of law by age 30. By 40, he'll have enough money to marry a working-class girl with a small dowry. If he's willing to court political favors and compromise his conscience a little, he might ascend faster and gain more impressive positions.

Whereas Rastignac has been trying to learn how to play by society's rules, Vautrin encourages him to reject them altogether. Doing things the conventional way, he explains, will take much too long and ultimately won't be very satisfying. Much as the boarding house looked shabbier after Rastignac visited the homes of Parisian nobility, Vautrin's picture of Rastignac's likely future is meant to look pathetic next to the more outwardly impressive life available to someone who's willing to cut corners and use others to their own benefit.

Vautrin tells Rastignac that he stands at the crossroads of his life. Having gotten a taste of luxury, he now has the word "*Succeed!*" branded on his forehead. Trying to get there through effort and struggle will take a long time. Unless he can get there through exceptional brilliance, he must get there through corruption, the "weapon of the mediocre majority." He says corruption is everywhere in Parisian society, and that it's "the only morality nowadays."

Manipulatively, Vautrin represents Rastignac's future to him as if it's a choice between two options. He heavily implies that Rastignac, like him, is too hungry for success to settle for the conventional, time-consuming approach to life. But since Rastignac isn't a genius, this means that he'll have to do what everyone else supposedly does: cheat.

Vautrin says that he's about to offer Rastignac something that nobody would refuse. He has a dream of moving to the United States, living a kingly life on a Southern plantation with hundreds of slaves. If Vautrin can get Rastignac a huge dowry, Rastignac will then give him a 20-percent commission. He will find some clever way of defrauding his naïve, loving wife out of this commission. Out of any 60 society weddings, Vautrin assures Rastignac, 47 are based on such transactions.

Unsurprisingly, given the way he's just presented his outlook on life, Vautrin has a self-serving scheme up his sleeve. In short, he'll get Rastignac a wealthy wife in exchange for a hefty commission—a shortcut to both wealth and a better marriage. He presents this as if it's what nearly everybody really does but few will admit to.

Vautrin tells Rastignac that such a gullible, devoted girl is right in front of him: Victorine. If her father, Taillefer, were to lose his son, Vautrin is sure that he would acknowledge Victorine and give her the son's dowry. Victorine will then marry Rastignac. This can be easily achieved when Vautrin calls in a favor from a friend, who will happily pick a quarrel with Victorine's brother and kill him in a duel. In a word of closing advice, he encourages Rastignac never to stick to his opinions. Instead, he should adjust his opinions to circumstances around him.

Vautrin coldly recommends manipulating and using Victorine, even eliminating the problem of the withheld dowry by arranging to have her brother murdered. The interesting question that emerges from this exchange is whether Vautrin's "morality" is in fact any better than Madame de Beauséant's; after all, both involve using and discarding people. The question will be explored as their respective characters are developed.

Before Rastignac starts ranting at him, Vautrin warns, he should consider that he, too, will someday flirt with a woman in order to get money. After all, how will Rastignac succeed in society if he doesn't put a price on his love? Besides that, Rastignac's future seductions, and even his law career, will be filled with ethical absurdities and injustices. There's little difference between those things and the Taillefer plan, except for the blood that will be shed. There is no fixed moral point in the world.

Vautrin curtails Rastignac's likely protests by pointing out that Rastignac is already planning to do something like this—does he think that his plans to search for a wife and build a career in the conventional way are, in the end, more respectable? Essentially, Vautrin is arguing that both of these approaches are filled with manipulations and betrayals; if anything, he implies, his method is more straightforward.

Rastignac doesn't take Vautrin's offer on the spot. However, he wonders whether Vautrin has taught him the truth about virtue. He ponders his situation and decides that he wants to take the slower path of integrity, allowing himself to maintain a clear conscience. Later, as Rastignac is trying on his newly tailored clothes, Père Goriot comes into his room and tells him about an upcoming ball where both of his daughters will be present. Rastignac decides to visit the Vicomtesse de Beauséant to see if he can secure an introduction to the ball's hostess. Dressed up in his impressive new clothes, Rastignac forgets the virtuous resolution he's just made.

This passage illustrates the fragile nature of Rastignac's sense of integrity, raising the question of whether his adherence to virtue is more out of habit than conviction. The allure of his new clothes, allowing him to picture himself inhabiting a whole different world, unsettles his sense of conviction—which, after all, is just theoretical.

In the past few days, Rastignac and Goriot have become good friends. Goriot is drawn to Rastignac's youth and sympathetic spirit; Rastignac, though not confiding his intentions in Goriot, hopes to gather more information from the man about his daughters. Goriot claims that he actually *prefers* having to see his daughters in secret. He asks their maids when his daughters are going out and waits for their carriages to pass by. He loves just seeing their smiles and hearing others' admiring comments as the women pass by. This is his way of being happy, and he's satisfied with it. He describes himself as a dead man whose soul rests with his daughters.

Rastignac's and Goriot's newfound friendship is another example of a relationship that has a certain transactional element: Goriot gets a sympathetic ear about his daughters, while Rastignac gets information to help him get closer to Madame de Nucingen. Goriot's description of enjoying his daughters' presence from afar is also an example of self-delusion and of a paternal relationship gone sadly awry.

As Rastignac strolls around town before his visit to the vicomtesse, he notices the admiring glances of other women, and that's the final nail in the coffin of his virtuous intentions. However, his good mood is shattered when he arrives at his cousin's, and she briskly refuses to see him, claiming that she's too busy. It reminds Rastignac painfully that they occupy different stations in life. However, he overlooks this slight, and the vicomtesse softens, inviting him to dinner later.

Now that Rastignac is beginning to gather the necessary tools to be successful in society, it's becoming harder for him to imagine sticking to his original plan of gaining success through hard work, suggesting that his ambition—which was initially virtuous—is slowly being corrupted.

When Rastignac returns to the Hôtel de Beauséant, he has never seen such an opulent table before. Comparing its elegance to the boarding house, he finds it hard to return to the mindset of sacrifice he'd embraced earlier that day. Over dinner, the vicomtesse invites him to accompany her to the theater that evening, since her husband, the vicomte, is unable to accompany her (she suspects that he's meeting his mistress). Rastignac soon finds himself swept along to the theater at the vicomtesse's side, the talk of onlookers. The vicomtesse points out Delphine de Nucingen, and Rastignac can't take his eyes off of her. He asks his cousin to arrange an introduction to the duchesse who is throwing the upcoming ball. She agrees and also encourages Rastignac to approach Delphine today, because she's in turmoil over her lover, de Marsay.

Exposure to luxury continues to deepen wealth's allure and weaken Rastignac's commitment to a better path. When his cousin invites him to the theater, he also sees what can be accomplished by knowing the right people. The vicomtesse encourages Rastignac to take advantage of Delphine's depression over her lover by making himself look like a better alternative—an example of the kind of manipulation and calculating behavior that fuels the Parisian society of the novel.

Monsieur d'Ajuda comes to their box, and in gratitude for Rastignac quietly surrendering his seat, the vicomtesse asks d'Ajuda to introduce Rastignac to Delphine de Nucingen. Madame de Nucingen offers Rastignac the seat that her husband, the Baron de Nucingen, just vacated. Rastignac reveals that he is Goriot's housemate and that he unintentionally insulted Delphine's sister Anastasie and was barred from her house. Madame de Nucingen is charmed by Rastignac. She admits that she has been unhappy in her marriage, especially because of Monsieur de Nucingen's insistence that she not visit her father. Rastignac gives a flowery speech expressing his admiration and devotion to her, even though he's only seen her for the first time today. He remains at her side, making seductive remarks and getting encouraging smiles in return, until Madame de Nucingen's husband returns to take her home.

With dizzying speed, and with his new society acquaintances as intermediaries, Rastignac seems to be attaining the object of his desire. In fact, it all seems almost too easy. Delphine de Nucingen, unhappy in her own circumstances, indulges Rastignac's flattery, but it's not at all clear that she's the one being manipulated in this situation.

As Rastignac heads home, having secured the opportunity to call on Madame de Nucingen before the upcoming ball, he feels delighted with what he perceives as success. He doesn't know that Madame is totally distracted, waiting for a letter from her lover, de Marsay. His head is filled with plans. He even imagines teaching Madame de Nucingen to manipulate her husband, in order to help Rastignac make his fortune. By the time he arrives at the boarding house, he has convinced himself that he is quite enamored of Madame de Nucingen.

Rastignac takes the events of the evening at face value: he assumes he's been successful in winning over Madame de Nucingen, opening the door for him to secure his own place in society. In reality, he's forgotten one of the main lessons the vicomtesse taught him—to conceal one's true emotions (and to assume that others are doing the same). Instead, he's letting himself get swept away under the delusion of genuine mutual affection.

Back home, Rastignac sits in Père Goriot's squalid bedroom and gives the delighted old man a report about his daughter. Rastignac is dismayed by the shabbiness of the room, especially after the luxury he's seen today. Goriot, he tells Rastignac, doesn't believe that either of his daughters loves him more than the other; he's convinced that their mutual jealousy is just another proof of their affection for him.

Goriot's squalid bedroom is physical evidence of the way his daughters have taken advantage of him, and his delight—as well as the way he's convinced himself that his daughters adore him—is proof of the depth of the delusion under which he labors. Even more than Rastignac's feelings about Madame de Nucingen, Goriot's attitude illustrates how much society thrives on manipulation—and people's willingness to be manipulated.

Rastignac asks Goriot how, with his daughters living in such comfort, he is able to live in comparative poverty. Goriot says that comfort wouldn't mean anything to him—if his daughters are happy, he is happy. Furthermore, becoming a father taught Goriot about God's love for the world. Rastignac, observing how Goriot's love transforms his whole appearance, goes to bed disheartened. Though he pretended otherwise, Rastignac knows that Delphine didn't even send a message to her father.

Goriot's love for his daughters is complicated: on one hand, he completely erases himself, ignoring his own happiness and comfort for their sakes. On the other hand, in his obsession with providing for his daughters, Goriot thinks of himself in an almost godlike way. Family relationships can become twisted in manifold ways, to the harm of everyone involved. An outsider, Rastignac can see that the women don't truly love Goriot.

At breakfast the next day, everyone is surprised to see Goriot's newfound intimacy with Rastignac. As he is wandering around the city later that day—he can't stand to remain in the boarding house for long—Rastignac runs into his medical student friend, Bianchon. He confides something of his dilemma to Bianchon; Bianchon thinks that Rastignac is trying to find a shortcut to getting started in life. Bianchon, for his part, is happy to make a modest living as a provincial doctor. He believes that happiness ultimately lies within a person, not in the size of his influence or his income.

Bianchon is the voice of reason in Rastignac's life. He sees through Rastignac's moral dilemma, accurately summing up the heart of the problem: that Rastignac just wants to find an easier path to success. In Bianchon's opinion, Rastignac's problem is his standard for success. If Rastignac could adjust those standards—and accept that happiness doesn't come from external success—he thinks that Rastignac's turmoil would be resolved.

At home, Rastignac receives a note from Madame de Nucingen, inviting him to dinner and the opera. He suspects that she is using him to try to get back at her lover, de Marsay, though it is more likely that she is trying to get access to Madame de Beauséant through him. In any case, he accepts the invitation out of curiosity. All the boarders applaud and tease Rastignac when he emerges in his fine clothes, ready for the evening.

Rastignac isn't totally naïve—he knows that Madame de Nucingen is playing games with him, too. Nevertheless, he still believes he can maintain the upper hand in this developing relationship.

Rastignac finds Madame de Nucingen in a depressed mood. During a carriage ride, he finally gets her to admit her troubles to him: she needs money. She stops the carriage near the Palais-Royal and asks Rastignac to stake 100 francs on a game of roulette. Rastignac has never gambled, but he is thrilled—because Madame has put herself in this compromising situation, he thinks, she will never be able to deny him anything. Rastignac goes into a nearby gaming-house and asks for advice. To the onlookers' astonishment, he wins several rounds of roulette—he returns to Madame de Nucingen with 7,000 francs. She embraces him with tears of relief. She confesses to Rastignac that the Baron de Nucingen doesn't give her any money to spend freely; she is entirely dependent on a stingy allowance, and having spent the dowry Goriot gave her, she is too proud and ashamed to beg either her husband or father for more. It's implied that Madame de Nucingen's lover, de Marsay, used to give her money as well, but that he no longer does due to their falling-out.

Madame de Nucingen is using Rastignac just as she uses her father: to get her out of a difficult financial situation. If anything, though, her use of Rastignac is even more degrading—he doesn't even have anything to offer her himself, he's simply a convenient person to send into the gaming salon on her behalf. At the same time, Madame's situation—utterly dependent on the favors of father, husband, and lover—shows how financially trapped a woman could become. The way society is set up, in other words, incentivizes manipulative relationships just like this one.

Madame de Nucingen explains that half the women in Paris live this way: even if they live outwardly luxurious lives, they are secretly consumed by worry over money. Some cheat their husbands or even allow their children to go hungry in order to scrounge for a new dress. Rastignac comforts her as she weeps, promising he thinks no less of her because of this information. Madame de Nucingen says that she intends to live simply from now on, and she makes Rastignac promise never to go gambling again—she would be grieved if he became corrupt because of her. She invites Rastignac to dine with her whenever there's a production at the Italiens theater.

Madame de Nucingen's confession highlights wealth's false allure. Wealth is basically just an illusion and a trap. Once a person attains a high position in society, they must constantly struggle to maintain that position, often in ways that degrade their relationships and lead them to use others. If Rastignac takes this admission to heart, however, he doesn't show it—and Madame's fear of "corrupting" him is ironic, since the process of corruption was underway before he ever did this errand for her.

As Rastignac returns home after the concert, he reflects that the more he's exposed to Parisian life, the more ambitious he becomes. When he tells Goriot about the evening, Goriot is jealous and dismayed that Delphine didn't come to him for money instead. Goriot's passionate emotions prompt Rastignac to want to be an honest man.

On some level, Rastignac is aware that his desire for wealth is corrupting his ambition. Yet his sense of integrity continues to fluctuate, as his reaction to Goriot suggests.

The next day, Madame de Beauséant gives Rastignac an introduction to the duchesse who's throwing the ball, allowing him to attend. Rastignac also sees Madame de Nucingen in her finery. During the ball, Rastignac notices that his relationship to Madame de Beauséant, as well as his acknowledged "conquest" of Madame de Nucingen, have raised his social standing and now draw others' envious glances. He receives invitations to other houses, and he begins to feel conceited.

On the basis of his relationship with the two women, Rastignac is beginning to ascend the social ladder as he's dreamed of doing since he first came to Paris. As more doors open, Rastignac feels increasingly entitled to move in wealthy circles—a sign of further corruption. Social climbing has little to do with getting to know a person as an individual—it's all about one's connection to the network of those who are acknowledged to be worth knowing.

The next day, Vautrin smiles in a sinister way when he hears Rastignac describe his success at the ball. He reminds Rastignac of the tremendous expense that's required to maintain a high-society lifestyle. Rastignac, therefore, must either resign himself to drudgery as a lawyer or pursue a different path. Vautrin winks in Victorine's direction, reminding Rastignac of his arguments and the "seeds of corruption" he'd planted.

Vautrin diabolically hovers around the edges of Rastignac's life like a symbol of corruption. He reminds Rastignac of what he's already learned firsthand from wealthy acquaintances—that a wealthy lifestyle begins to consume those who embrace it. Vautrin's transparent desire is to see Rastignac fall.

Rastignac begins dining daily with Madame de Nucingen and escorting her wherever she goes. He spends excessive amounts of money, gambles, and wastes his time on luxury—he has grown accustomed to living extravagantly. Rastignac sends back repayment and gifts to his mother and sisters. However, he never seems to have enough money for daily necessities. He can't pay his rent to Madame Vauquer, yet he always has enough to indulge his vanity on credit. Rastignac realizes that to continue on this path to success, he has to renounce all his youthful idealism.

Rastignac begins to fall into the trap he's laid for himself—the wealthy lifestyle he's desired is now beginning to consume him, demanding far more than it delivers. Just as Madame de Nucingen warned him, indulging in wealthy pursuits leaves one scrambling to afford the necessities of everyday life. Rastignac can see that his integrity is fragmenting.

Late one evening in the dining room, Rastignac lingers pensively, long after most of the other boarders have gone back to their rooms. At this point, no matter if Madame de Nucingen's feelings toward him are genuine or not, Rastignac is infatuated; his heart is involved now. If Rastignac had once believed that he was manipulating Madame de Nucingen, it's now clear that *she's* in charge. For her part, Madame de Nucingen is still feeling wounded by de Marsay and toys with Rastignac for that reason.

The true nature of his situation becomes clear to Rastignac: he's being manipulated. Even though he started out playing with calculated emotions, those very emotions have wound up betraying him. But simply knowing this doesn't free Rastignac from his situation; he's too deeply mired in debt and entangling relationships.

On this particular evening, a frustrated Rastignac, not realizing that Vautrin is lingering nearby and watching everything, thinks about the plan they'd discussed and throws a tender glance at Victorine, who's sitting in front of the fire. When she asks if Rastignac is troubled, Rastignac says that young men like him are always worried about being truly loved. In response, Victorine gives him an unambiguous look. Vautrin interrupts the conversation at this moment.

Rastignac is so desperate—and has become so corrupted by his situation—that he begins softening toward the plan that he earlier found repugnant and tried to resist. His comment to Victorine is practically a declaration of love—and despite being fake on his side, it invites the innocent Victorine to declare sincere love for him.

After the women leave the room, Vautrin coolly tells Rastignac that he knew the younger man would come around to his plan. But he tells Rastignac that he wants him to make that decision out of reason, not desperation—if he needs money, Vautrin will give him some. Rastignac does need the money and trembles at the temptation, but he refuses at first, finally agreeing to accept the banknotes as a loan. Vautrin goes on to say that he's planning to move to America soon, where he'll make his fortune and bequeath it to Rastignac. He tells Rastignac that he lives on a higher plane than everybody else; he looks at his actions only as means to an end. Rastignac continues to tell himself that he'll never marry Victorine. He finds Vautrin repugnant, and yet Vautrin's cynicism and his position in society are attractive to Rastignac.

Vautrin sees his approach to life as being morally superior to everyone else's. He doesn't kid himself that he's behaving according to some higher good, in other words; he acts according to what he wants, nothing more nor less. He doesn't want Rastignac to make a decision about marrying Victorine until he's capable of this same kind of amoral detachment—until he's been corrupted to the point that he's truly Vautrin's protégé. Rastignac, meanwhile, can no longer tell himself that this will never happen—he admits that Vautrin's outlook is appealing.

CHAPTER 3: DEATH-DODGER

Two days later, Poiret and Mademoiselle Michonneau sit in the boarding house garden, talking to a detective named Monsieur Gondureau. Slyly discerning that both Poiret and Michonneau respect bureaucracy, Gondureau tells them that France's Minister of Police has determined that Vautrin is actually an escaped convict from Toulon, known as Death-Dodger. He had been imprisoned for involvement in a forgery charge. Vautrin's real name is Jacques Collin, and he now serves as a kind of agent and banker for the inmates at Toulon, making a good living from this. Some of Death-Dodger's money is also believed to come from the Society of Ten Thousand, an association of professional thieves, for whom Death-Dodger is an expert adviser. Death-Dodger's resources and expertise "support a standing army of villains permanently at war with society."

Vautrin's background is finally revealed, and at this point, it's not much of a surprise—his stance toward society (as a professional thief) matches his outlook on the world (society is there to be manipulated and used according to his liking). Vautrin's position as a director and adviser of other thieves also matches his manipulative role in Rastignac's life. He molds others in his own image in order to unleash them on society and do further damage.

Gondureau explains that the Minister wants to be sure he's got the right man, so he needs Poiret and Michonneau to work undercover for him. Gondureau will give them a phial of a drug that, when mixed into someone's drink and swallowed, makes a person look as if they've suffered a stroke. They'll mix this into Vautrin's wine or coffee and, after he collapses, have him carried off to bed. Then, they'll sneak into his room, undress him, and check for the branding of a thief on Vautrin's shoulder. If Vautrin *does* turn out to be Death-Dodger, Poiret and Michonneau will receive a reward of three thousand francs.

In a way, the inconspicuous boarders Poiret and Michonneau are being manipulated and corrupted, too—tempted with money to betray a fellow boarder. Although their intentions are arguably more noble than other characters' manipulative ploys (after all, they'll be bringing a criminal to justice), their involvement in this scheme shows that everyone in the world of the novel is motivated by financial gain to some extent.

After Gondureau leaves, Mademoiselle Michonneau and Poiret discuss the ethics of the whole situation. Should she forewarn Vautrin, Mademoiselle wonders? After all, he'd probably reward her financially. On the other hand, if they don't go through with this scheme and Vautrin murders the inhabitants of the boarding house, won't they be culpable for those murders too? They don't notice that Bianchon overhears bits of the whole conversation on his way home from his medical school lecture. They do, however, notice Rastignac and Victorine engaged in an intimate conversation as they enter the boarding house.

The two boarders try to decide if they want to be complicit in the scheme to arrest Vautrin. Mademoiselle Michonneau's reasoning largely seems to be based on how the decision will affect her. Meanwhile, Rastignac's manipulation of Victorine, set in motion by Vautrin, continues apace.

This morning, Rastignac is in despair over Madame de Nucingen. Inwardly, he has given in to Vautrin's plan, having made certain promises to Victorine. Victorine is decidedly in love. Rastignac, meanwhile, struggles with his conscience: he knows he's behaving wrongly, but tells himself that he'll make up for it by making Victorine happy.

Rastignac is deeply entangled in Vautrin's plan and in the false rewards of high society. He soothes his feelings for Madame de Nucingen by using and betraying Victorine, based on the vague assumption that he'll make it up to the young woman later.

After Victorine goes to her room, Vautrin comes in and informs Rastignac that his friend who owes him a favor has instigated a quarrel with Victorine's brother—all is going according to plan. Tomorrow the duel will take place, and by evening, Victorine will be an heiress. Rastignac slumps in shock, unable to respond, but Vautrin tells him that Taillefer's vast fortune will set him straight. Rastignac quietly resolves to warn the Taillefers that evening.

Though Rastignac has been playing with fire by giving in to Vautrin's plan so far, he still hadn't accepted how high the stakes are—until Vautrin tells him that someone's life is in the balance. The fact that Rastignac decides to intervene shows that his conscience isn't totally corrupted.

Then, Goriot comes in and draws Rastignac aside. He tells Rastignac that he and Delphine have set aside a luxurious apartment for Rastignac to move into in three days' time—it's a surprise they've been working on. He asks Rastignac if he can move into the room above the apartment so that he can be closer to his daughter, wiping away tears of happiness at the very thought. Rastignac can hardly respond. The contrast between the impending duel and the prospect of having his dreams of Delphine realized is too overwhelming. Nevertheless, he happily accepts a beautiful watch that Delphine has sent him by way of Goriot. Before he goes to see Delphine personally, he asks Goriot to drop by Taillefer's and ask him when Rastignac might drop by—Rastignac must speak with him urgently. Before Rastignac can explain why, however, Vautrin interrupts, standing in the **doorway** and singing loudly.

Two threads of Rastignac's journey in society are coming together: his pursuit of success by way of Madame de Nucingen and his corruption by Vautrin. Their overlap suggests that, no matter what, the attempt to maneuver in Paris's high society will end up corrupting a person one way or another. Vautrin, never far away, continues to disrupt Rastignac's lingering good intentions, suggesting that Rastignac is now too entrenched in all of this to escape.

Vautrin, Goriot, and Rastignac go downstairs to dinner together. Vautrin is in high spirits, dismaying Rastignac and drawing Mademoiselle Michonneau's keen glance. Vautrin has brought a bottle of Bordeaux to share with the other boarders. He pours a glass for Rastignac and Goriot, and after the other two have already drunk, he samples some himself and decides it's no good. Vautrin has Christophe get out bottles for everyone else, and soon everyone is roaring drunk. Goriot and Rastignac, however, grow drowsy—and just before Rastignac drops off to sleep, Vautrin whispers in his ear that he can't outsmart "Papa Vautrin."

Vautrin has obviously poisoned the wine he offered to Rastignac and Goriot, thwarting Rastignac's intentions of disrupting his plan. Rastignac's good intentions were too little, too late.

Vautrin invites Madame Vauquer to go to the theater with him that evening. Sylvie hauls Goriot upstairs to bed, while Rastignac falls asleep on Victorine's shoulder, to her delight. When Vautrin draws up with the carriage, Victorine wants to leave the room, afraid that Vautrin will make off-color remarks. But Madame Couture says that Vautrin is a good man, no matter how blunt he appears. When Vautrin comes in, he admires the young couple and tells Madame Couture that Rastignac is angelic, surely as beautiful in his soul as in his features. He asks to see Victorine's hand, claiming that he knows something about palmistry. Studying her hand, he says that Victorine is destined to become a wealthy heiress before long.

Vautrin's amiable character fools even the most good-hearted and innocent people, like Madame Couture. Vautrin's pretended fortune-telling is chilling, since the audience knows what the women don't: that Vautrin has already put in motion the murder of Victorine's brother.

After Vautrin and Madame Vauquer leave for the theater, Madame Couture and Victorine talk about Victorine's future. Victorine says that she could never enjoy becoming an heiress if it cost her brother's life. The two women help Rastignac to bed, and Victorine steals a kiss on his forehead, going to bed happy.

Victorine's genuine emotions are heart-wrenching, contrasting with the insincerity, calculation, and manipulative efforts at control coming to fruition all around her. She is the only fully sincere character in the novel.

That night's revelry, which Vautrin intended as a way to get Goriot and Rastignac drunk, turns out to be costly for him, too. Bianchon, after getting drunk, forgot to ask Mademoiselle Michonneau about what he'd overhead on his way home. If Bianchon had said the name "Death-Dodger" at the dinner table, as he'd intended, Vautrin would have been put on his guard. Meanwhile, after Vautrin teased Michonneau in questionable taste, she decided to go ahead and betray Vautrin instead of warning him about the investigation. She and Poiret go to Gondureau to collect the phial of potion. Gondureau admits that he and his men are hoping for some violence during the arrest, so that they'll have an excuse to kill Death-Dodger and avoid the expense of custody and trial. He will see them the next day.

Vautrin, for all his carefully laid plans and criminal expertise, is human, too—he can't fully control the circumstances around him. And even a passing remark can cause a petty individual, like Mademoiselle Michonneau, to move against him. Gondureau's intentions aren't pure, either—like many people, he'd prefer to take questionable shortcuts in order to make life easier for himself.

The next day is a momentous one for the Maison Vauquer. Most of the residents sleep late, and Mademoiselle Michonneau uses this opportunity to pour the potion into Vautrin's usual cup. When breakfast finally begins, Rastignac receives a letter from Madame de Nucingen. Delphine writes to Rastignac that she waited up for him until two in the morning. She begs for reassurance and an explanation. Rastignac, frantic, asks what time it is. Vautrin, calmly stirring his coffee, informs him that it's half-past eleven.

Vautrin succeeded in stopping Rastignac from fulfilling his plan to warn the Taillefers, to Rastignac's horrified realization. But, in a point of dramatic irony, Vautrin is about to be thwarted anyway.

Just then, a cab can be heard outside. One of Monsieur Taillefer's servants hurries in. Victorine is urgently needed, he says—her brother Frédéric has been mortally wounded in a duel. Vautrin wonders how such a wealthy young man could have gotten into a quarrel—he muses that the young don't know how to behave themselves. Rastignac shouts at him in horror. After Victorine and Madame Couture rush out, Madame Vauquer remarks that Vautrin seems like a prophet for having predicted the young woman's match with Rastignac.

Vautrin's seemingly detached musings show the extent of his coldness. Madame Vauquer's naïve comment also shows that she's willfully deluded about Vautrin, who's actually orchestrated the whole situation between Victorine and Rastignac.

Rastignac, however, tells Madame Vauquer emphatically that he has no intention of marrying Victorine. He sends a message back to Madame de Nucingen that he's on his way. Furious, he mutters to himself that "there's no evidence." Vautrin smiles, but right then, Madame Michonneau's potion takes effect, and he falls over. Thinking Vautrin has had a stroke, Madame Vauquer sends for the doctor. After Vautrin has been maneuvered into his bed, Mademoiselle Michonneau sends Madame Vauquer in search of ether, while she and Poiret hastily get Vautrin's shirt off and check his shoulder. Sure enough, they find the thief's branding on his shoulder.

Rastignac worries that he'll be implicated in Victorine's brother's death, a possibility that will tarnish Rastignac's efforts to ingratiate himself with high society. Rastignac's selfish concerns in this situation, as opposed to being worried about Victorine, exhibit the moral corruption associated with chasing wealth and status. And as the dramatic tension mounts, Mademoiselle Michonneau and Poiret confirm that Vautrin is definitely Death-Dodger.

Rastignac takes a walk, wondering what to do. Will he be named as an accomplice in Vautrin's crime? He interrogates his own conscience and finally concludes that Delphine's love is his anchor. He will remain faithful to her, and he will treat Goriot like a father, he decides. Rastignac decides there is nothing sinful in their relationship. After all, they're not lying to anyone, and Delphine and the Baron de Nucingen have lived apart for a long time.

Rastignac's tortured musings suggest that, once a person becomes mired in the moral compromises inherent in Paris society, there is no end in sight. Rastignac plays the situations with Vautrin and with the de Nucingens off against each other at this point, desperate to quiet his conscience.

Back at the Maison Vauquer, Bianchon has given Vautrin an emetic and sent the results to his hospital for chemical analysis. Mademoiselle Michonneau tries to stop him, confirming Bianchon's suspicions. By the time Rastignac returns, Vautrin is recovered and standing in the drawing-room. When Vautrin says that it would take much more to kill him, Bianchon speaks up that he's heard of a fellow nicknamed "Death-Dodger" and that this title would suit Vautrin. Vautrin turns pale and staggers, and Mademoiselle Michonneau has to sit down. Vautrin's jovial face turns ferocious.

Vautrin's true nature is close to being revealed. Ultimately, though, he's undermined by an overheard conversation and a deceitful old woman—suggesting that even a hardened criminal can be betrayed by someone who's sufficiently motivated by self-interest. This is an ironic confirmation of Vautrin's self-serving worldview.

Then, everyone hears a group of men marching down the street. Before Vautrin can escape, four armed soldiers appear at the **door**, while others block the various exits. Everyone's eyes are fixed on Vautrin. The chief of the soldiers knocks Vautrin's wig off his head, revealing closely cropped red hair. Seeing his cunning intelligence, mounting rage, and animalistic energy, everyone suddenly understands who Vautrin really is.

There's a certain humor in this scene—apparently, all it takes is the removal of Vautrin's wig to reveal him for the terrifying criminal he really is. This suggests that, in reality, the truth about Vautrin is never far beneath the surface—it's just that people, all too willing to be manipulated, haven't been willing to see it for themselves.

Vautrin subdues his anger and calmly submits to arrest, to the onlookers' admiration. He admits to everyone present that his name is Jacques Collin, known as Death-Dodger. When Madame Vauquer, shocked, says that he went to the theater with him last night, Vautrin replies that it did her no harm. In fact, he goes on, none of the boarders are any better than him—the brand of the thief is no worse than what these people have in their hearts. He tells Rastignac that their deal is still on, and that even from prison, he knows how to collect payment.

Vautrin's claim to Madame Vauquer is that, in a certain way, he's more honest than the rest of them are—it's just that he's acted *on the criminal intentions of his heart, while others conceal them. Everyone, in other words, is somehow complicit in the failings of a corrupt society.*

Vautrin correctly guesses that Mademoiselle Michonneau is his betrayer and says that he would have paid her off handsomely if she had warned him of the coming arrest. The others look at Michonneau in disgust. Before Vautrin leaves, he says goodbye to Rastignac in a gentler tone. After he's gone, everyone except for Poiret refuses to continue eating with Mademoiselle Michonneau. If Madame Vauquer throws her out, they say, they'll all keep quiet about the incident with Vautrin. At last, Poiret offers his arm to Mademoiselle, and the two depart in the midst of the other boarders' mockery.

Vautrin seems to harbor a real fatherly affection for Rastignac—but whether this is because he admires the young man's lingering innocence, or because he sees in Rastignac a younger version of himself, is left for the audience to decide. Meanwhile, the boarders, still not reconciled to the truth about their friendly housemate, are more scandalized by Mademoiselle Michonneau's betrayal than by the criminal charges.

Then, a messenger comes in with the news that Victorine's brother died that afternoon. Madame Couture and Victorine will now live with Taillefer, who has accepted his daughter. Madame Vauquer laments that disaster has come upon her boarding house. Soon, Père Goriot arrives in a cab and insistently takes Rastignac out with him to dine with Delphine in Rastignac's new apartment.

Events are unfolding as Vautrin had predicted and plotted that they would. But Madame Vauquer can only think about the consequences to herself—just another example of how, in Balzac's view, people are primarily self-interested in their emotions.

Leaving the boarding house in the cab, Rastignac feels disoriented by the events of the day. Goriot is joyful at the prospect of dining with his daughter for the first time in years. Soon, they're in Rastignac's new bachelor apartment, tastefully furnished and overlooking a garden. There they find Delphine, whom Rastignac embraces, weeping with relief.

Though Goriot seems to have a genuine affection for Rastignac, he mainly sees the young man as a means for getting closer to his daughter. At the same time, for Rastignac, Delphine mostly seems to symbolize escape from his circumstances.

After touring the apartment, Rastignac tells Delphine that he cannot accept it. Vautrin's arrest is still too fresh in his mind; he realizes how much he's been spared, and he can't deny his ideals now. He feels depressed. Goriot tries to change Rastignac's mind, telling him that success is written on his face. He says that he's offering Rastignac the weapons needed in order to succeed in modern society. Goriot surprises both Rastignac and Delphine by admitting that he has paid for it all himself—Rastignac can pay him back later. Living upstairs, after all, Goriot can get by on almost nothing. When Rastignac says that he will try to be worthy of Goriot's actions, Goriot tells Delphine that Rastignac is going to refuse Victorine and her millions for Delphine's sake. Rastignac wishes that the old man had kept silent about that.

Rastignac continues to vacillate over the path he'll take in life; Vautrin's arrest has scared him, and it's enough to tarnish the glamor of Delphine's offer. Interestingly, Goriot's attempts to persuade Rastignat echo Vautrin's—suggesting that there are many paths to corruption, whether they're Vautrin's naked self-interest or Goriot's desperation for his daughters' affection.

Over dinner, Goriot is almost childish in his fawning attentions to Delphine. Rastignac can't help feeling a little jealous. As he and Goriot return to the boarding house by carriage, they try to outdo each other with praise of Delphine. Rastignac admits to himself that Goriot's love is purer and deeper than his own, and that his own can never surpass it.

Now that Goriot is close to his goal of being closer to Delphine, it doesn't actually seem to elevate him. In Rastignac's case, the indulgence of desires seems to bring out emotions that are more *self-serving, not less.*

When they get home, Madame Vauquer is sitting up with Sylvie and Christophe, lamenting the disappearance of her boarders—now Goriot and Rastignac will join the rest. She tells the others that Vautrin was such a good man, it's hard to believe he could really have been a criminal. The next morning, Madame Vauquer has collected herself, but she laments that the boarding house seems to be cursed—she's sure that somebody will die within 10 days. Who will it be?

Madame Vauquer continues to see the whole situation in a self-serving way. More than that, she can't reconcile herself to the truth about Vautrin. She continues to delude herself that he's a decent human being, supporting Balzac's argument that people are generally happy to be manipulated if it allows them to maintain their delusions.

That noon, Rastignac receives an invitation to give to the de Nucingens, to a ball held by Madame de Beauséant. He can't wait to convey this desirable news to Delphine. A man's first love in Paris can never be rivaled, because love in Paris is unlike love anywhere else. Such love is false and excessive, almost a religion, and it leaves devastation in its wake. Only those who live in isolation manage to escape its demands. Rastignac is not such a person—he wants to remain engaged in the world, attempting to master love without having any sense of the end goal.

All along, Madame de Nucingen has been longing for the social status gained through an introduction to Madame de Beauséant, and she finally has it. Rastignac knows full well that this is primarily what she wants from him, but as the narrator points out, it doesn't even matter to him at this point—his passion for Delphine has degraded into a kind of fanaticism that doesn't worry about the implications.

Despite Rastignac's attraction to the aristocratic life, he had always remained a nobleman at heart. However, now that he's seen the apartment Delphine furnished for him, his mind has changed. He's gotten a taste of material wealth, and there is no going back. He is like a different Rastignac from the one who first arrived in Paris a year ago.

Rastignac, like his friend Bianchon, hails from the effectively middle-class nobility of the rural provinces. But, unlike his friend, Rastignac can no longer be content with that life. The temptation of wealth has corrupted his ambition too thoroughly.

As predicted, Delphine is delighted to receive the invitation to Madame de Beauséant's ball. She embraces Rastignac and tells him that she's ready to make any sacrifice for him. She also tells Rastignac some rumors concerning her sister Madame de Restaud. Anastasie is said to have sold her diamonds in order to pay off her lover Monsieur de Trailles's massive debt. For that reason, she's planning to appear at the ball in a fine new dress. Delphine is therefore determined to appear at the ball, too, so that she won't be outshined by her sister.

Delphine and Rastignac's relationship is transactional, and they both acknowledge this fact. Delphine's relationship with her sister, meanwhile, is characterized by jealousy and rivalry. In both cases, the overriding concern is one's reputation in society—not one's genuine feelings.

Later that evening, as Delphine and Rastignac say a lingering goodbye, Delphine admits that she has a premonition of some catastrophe, as if she must pay for her happiness. But Rastignac goes home happy, planning to leave the boarding house for good the next day. As he passes Goriot's room, Goriot says that tomorrow, they'll start their life of happiness.

Delphine's ominous premonition echoes Madame Vauquer's prediction that someone will die in the next 10 days. No matter how Delphine tries to delude herself otherwise, her so-called happiness isn't genuine. It's implied that the same must be true of Goriot, though he appears cheerfully unsuspicious of this fact.

CHAPTER 4: THE FATHER'S DEATH

The next day, Rastignac and Goriot prepare to move out of the Maison Vauquer. Around noon, Madame de Nucingen shows up. In his room, Rastignac overhears Delphine's conversation with her father: she's in financial trouble. She's just learned that Baron de Nucingen has been investing all their money, including her dowry, into various stalled projects. If Delphine insisted on the Baron returning her dowry, as Goriot's lawyer has been insisting on her behalf, then the de Nucingens will have to declare bankruptcy. If Delphine can wait a year, the Baron promises that he'll amass a fortune, making her mistress of all his property.

The fragile "happiness" the characters experience is short-lived, as Delphine's visit portends. She is trapped by her husband's financial problems, and Goriot's unhappiness seems to come partly from the fact that his money is being misspent in this way. In other words, the happiness he tried to secure for his daughter through her marriage has finally proven to be an illusion.

Baron de Nucingen has promised to mend his ways and grant Delphine freedom with her money, if only she will do this. He's at her mercy and has been raving in a suicidal manner. Goriot insists that the Baron is fooling her and just trying to exploit her financially. He can't bear the thought that his hard-earned fortune be surrendered to Baron de Nucingen. "Money," he says, "is life"—his happiness consists in knowing that Delphine is well provided for. Goriot wants to resolve this matter at once and, his rant concluded, begins to feel unwell.

This situation seems to undercut Goriot's belief that "money is life"—if anything, it's no better than an insufficient temporary fix for perennial problems—yet he can't seem to let go of the delusion after all this time. It seems, though, that maintaining the illusion has taken a physical toll on Goriot—suggesting that the reality of a situation has to break through in one way or another, no matter what lies people tell themselves.

Madame de Nucingen cautions Goriot that Baron de Nucingen is blackmailing her. If she lets him do as he likes with her money, she explains, he won't raise a fuss over her relationship with Rastignac. In other words, if she wants to get away with romantic indiscretions, then she has to allow her husband to get away with his shady financial dealings, using her money. Delphine doesn't even know how to trace all the tremendous sums that her husband has paid. At this, Goriot collapses to his knees in despair at having given his daughter to such an unscrupulous man.

The Baron's threats to his wife are ultimately about saving face socially, as one would expect in a society marriage. Relationships are increasingly unraveling, showing that there's very little that's genuine at their core. Goriot's self-delusion, too, begins to unravel.

Just then, another carriage arrives—Madame de Restaud's. Somewhat embarrassed to find her sister here, she announces sadly that she has been ruined. She explains that Maxime's massive debts have driven him to despair. She confesses having pawned her mother-in-law's diamonds to the moneylender Gobseck in order to save Maxime—the rumors are true. Now her husband knows everything, however, and Anastasie faces ruin. He has made her promise that she will grant him authority to sell her property whenever he likes. And the sale of the diamonds didn't even cover Maxime's gambling debts—he's still short 12,000 francs. Goriot, in despair, admits that he has almost nothing left—he's spent his securities on fixing up Rastignac's new apartment.

The simultaneous financial ruin of both sisters seems almost comically unlikely, yet it serves to show that the entire family's happiness has been based upon delusions. Additionally, the complicated romantic entanglements that are so fashionable in the Paris society of the novel seemingly plunge people into almost unfathomable problems, proving to be self-defeating. The fact that Goriot has exhausted his resources helping Rastignac and Delphine maintain their affair is further proof of this fact.

Anastasie and Delphine begin squabbling over which of them is a more loyal daughter and which of them is more complicit in ruining their father financially. Appearing wild with grief, Goriot finally gets them to say they forgive one another. He says he would do anything to salvage Anastasie from this situation—even serve as a military substitute or rob a bank or commit murder. Finding himself useless to help his daughters, Goriot wants to die. He begins banging his head against the wall while his weeping daughters try to stop him.

The sisters' situation continues to unravel—and as their happiness is revealed to be an illusion, so is their father's. As Goriot's laments sound less and less in touch with reality, it's increasingly clear that his identification of his wellbeing with theirs has been self-destructive. Now that he's running out of options to help Anastasie and Delphine, his sense of self is also disintegrating.

Appalled at what he's hearing, Rastignac takes the blank bill of exchange he'd initially meant to use to pay back Vautrin and fills it out for 12,000 francs. He walks into Goriot's room, pretending to have been asleep until their conversation woke him. He tells Anastasie to cash the bill of exchange and he will pay it off. Anastasie is furious that Rastignac has overheard her and accuses Delphine of allowing this knowingly. Goriot collapses on his bed in grief.

Rastignac steps in to try to salvage things, but once again, he's only using money (or at least credit) to temporarily fix a fraught situation. Predictably, this gesture only further inflames the whole situation.

Anastasie leaves and Rastignac sees Delphine home, but then he returns to the boarding house, worried about Goriot. Bianchon observes the old man at dinner and confides to Rastignac that he believes Goriot has suffered a cerebral edema and is on the verge of a stroke, seemingly the result of a violent shock. That night at the theater, Delphine brushes off Rastignac's alarm, saying that her father is tough. The only disaster she couldn't face, she tells him, would be to lose Rastignac's love—nothing else matters to her. Anyway, she goes on, she and Anastasie can't help their father's sadness—he's seen through the façade of their ugly marriages, and really, it's *his* fault for not seeing the truth of them to begin with. Rastignac can't help feeling moved by Delphine's display of emotion, particularly her confession of love toward Rastignac himself.

Goriot's obsession with his daughters' wellbeing has finally undermined his health, as it's slowly threatened to do over the years. Yet this fact fails to make a deep impression on Delphine, whose callous comments reveal how little she truly cares for Goriot. And Rastignac, despite his care for the old man, is so infatuated with Delphine that he is still readily flattered by her. The bargains everyone has made—money in exchange for affection, real affection in exchange for fake—are coming back to haunt them.

Delphine changes the subject, explaining that the Marquis d'Ajuda's marriage contract with Mademoiselle de Rochefide is being signed by the king tomorrow. Madame de Beauséant doesn't know anything about the marriage and will be taken aback when she hears the news at the ball. Rastignac stays at his new apartment that night, and when he returns to the boarding house the next day, Goriot has taken to his bed. Madame Vauquer, annoyed about the two men overstaying their lease and not paying their rent, tells him that Goriot had gotten dressed up and gone out with his remaining silver earlier that day.

Just as Goriot's family's self-delusions are becoming unraveled by reality, so is Madame de Beauséant's—in a very public way, at that. Goriot still seems to be grasping for a way to salvage the entire situation with his daughters.

Bianchon is watching over Goriot, and he explains that Goriot overdid things earlier that day. He's also had a visit from Anastasie, who couldn't afford her new gown for the ball, and Goriot couldn't bear that she be outclassed by her sister, so he pawned his silver and took out a loan from Gobseck to help her. He will just eat bread. He continues rambling about his daughters, saying he'll go back into the pasta business and travel to Odessa to import grain. Bianchon and Rastignac take turns watching over Goriot all night. Madame de Restaud just sends a messenger to collect her money.

As Goriot's actions concerning his daughters become increasingly senseless, so does his grasp on reality, suggesting that pretense is finally giving way to the truth. In this way, the novel suggests that such falsehood is unsustainable in the long term—it will inevitably lead a person to ruin, no matter how deeply they've deluded themselves.

That night Delphine sends a letter reminding Rastignac to take her to the ball tonight and that, after the humiliation of learning about d'Ajuda's engagement, Madame de Beauséant will certainly throw no more balls, so Delphine won't waste this opportunity. Rastignac writes back that Goriot is dying. Since the doctor says that death isn't imminent, Rastignac, grieving, goes to see Delphine in person, but she's just upset that Rastignac isn't yet dressed for the ball. Unable to reason with her, Rastignac goes to his apartment to dress. He reflects on the dreariness of society and its petty crimes—at least Vautrin's crimes were more honest. He wishes he were among his family, living their quiet, virtuous life. Yet he can't bring himself to disappoint Delphine, knowing he's selfishly in love with her. Thus, he rationalizes going to the ball anyway.

In society, everyone's behavior is governed by the necessity of maintaining appearances in the face of cruel reality—and distracting themselves from their own suffering by reveling in one another's. Rastignac begins to suspect that Vautrin was right—at least Vautrin was honest about his own heart and didn't rationalize his cruelties the way people do when they reconcile themselves to society's rules. Yet within the Paris of the novel, there seems to be no escape from the toxic influence of these social norms.

Rastignac can't stop thinking about Goriot, but Delphine refuses to visit him until after the ball. At the ball, all of society has turned out to witness Madame de Beauséant's downfall. Yet she is completely composed, neither sorrowful nor faking cheerfulness. She greets Rastignac with genuine warmth, however, and asks him never to betray a woman. She sends him to d'Ajuda to collect her letters. When Rastignac returns with the letters, the vicomtesse burns them. She tells Rastignac that tomorrow, she is leaving Paris "to bury [herself] in the depths of Normandy." As a token of friendship, Rastignac accompanies his cousin as she makes her rounds at her last ball. Afterward, the vicomtesse bids a sincere goodbye to Madame de Langeais, who asks the vicomtesse's forgiveness for having wronged her at times. At five o'clock in the morning, Rastignac bids his cousin goodbye and walks home.

Despite her participation in her corrupt society and her efforts to train Rastignac in the same, Madame de Beauséant seems to retain a measure of integrity. She defies society's expectations by taking her humiliation in stride. Nevertheless, like Goriot's decline in the face of reality, the vicomtesse is "dying" in her own way, even if it's just a social death. Rastignac's gestures of kindness to his cousin show that he, too, isn't yet completely corrupt. It's possible, then, to extricate oneself from Paris society unscathed—but one basically has to be willing to commit social suicide in order to escape.

The next day, Bianchon tells Rastignac that Goriot doesn't have much time left, but that they will nurse him to the last. Neither of them has money for the old man's care; Rastignac will gamble for it or beg Goriot's sons-in-law if he must. After hearing Bianchon's final instructions, Rastignac sits down with Goriot, who deliriously asks about his daughters. Rastignac reflects that noble souls can't last long in this society. Goriot rallies slightly as Rastignac keeps him company, and his complaints of pain mix with questions about his daughters, whom he's sure will be coming to visit him soon.

Especially after witnessing his cousin's gracious departure the night before, and now seeing how Goriot continues to care for his daughters even as their selfishness costs him his life, Rastignac reflects that sincere emotions don't have a lasting place in this corrupt society. Yet, in common with his friend Bianchon, Rastignac still retains enough humanity himself to care for the abandoned old man, who persists in his delusion.

Christophe has been sent to summon Goriot's daughters. When he returns, he reports that Madame de Restaud was discussing business matters with her husband but promised to come afterward. Madame de Nucingen is still sleeping after last night's ball, and her maid refuses to disturb her. Goriot wakes up at this point and laments that his daughters aren't coming. He says he's known for years that it would end up like this, but he didn't want to admit it to himself.

Anastasie and Delphine are too consumed by the lives they've chosen for themselves to show any final loyalty to their dying father—a fact that he finally admits to having suspected all along.

Goriot goes on to lament that money buys anything, including daughters. If he were rich and hadn't spent all his fortune, he knows that his daughters would be here, weeping over him. If a person is poor, at least he knows that others' love is sincere. Yet he'd give anything just to have his daughters here. Goriot talks to Rastignac about his history with the girls and the pain of first discovering, not long after their marriages, that they were embarrassed by his presence. He cries out to God that he has atoned for the sin of loving his daughters too addictively. Raving, he alternates between blaming and cursing his daughters for their negligence and interceding on their behalf, blaming himself for spoiling them and becoming their dupe.

Goriot sees that money has thoroughly corrupted his relationship with his daughters, and yet he'd be willing to pay for the privilege of seeing them one last time—showing how badly damaged their relationship has become. In the end, it seems there's no peaceful resolution for their relationship—Goriot must both curse and mourn what he's helped to bring about.

Frightened by the old man's raving, Rastignac sends Christophe for a cab. Goriot collapses again, almost lifeless. Rastignac leaves Bianchon, who has just run in, the watch Delphine gave him with instructions to pawn it for Goriot's expenses. When he reaches the de Restauds' and is finally admitted by Monsieur, the comte coldly brushes off his news of the man's imminent demise. Goriot, he says, has only caused him trouble. But he finally lets Rastignac speak to Anastasie, who is crying and appears to be totally cowed by her husband. She tells Rastignac that her father would forgive her if he knew the situation, and Rastignac leaves, realizing that Anastasie isn't free to follow.

The pawning of Delphine's watch, in some small measure, seems to pay Goriot back for his efforts to bring Rastignac and his daughter together. In the end, though, his daughters—especially Anastasie—effectively choose the marriages that their father secured for them over Goriot himself, or at least feel helpless to do otherwise. This situation confirms Balzac's argument that society incentivizes status-driven relationships and that genuine ones are a casualty of this.

When Rastignac gets to the de Nucingens' house, Delphine complains of a chill and says she'd better not go out; she doesn't believe Goriot is as ill as Rastignac says. She notices, however, that Rastignac isn't wearing the watch she gave him. He tells her he's pawned it to pay for her father's death shroud. She finally springs up and gives him what little money she has. Rastignac, hopeful, rushes back to Goriot, telling him that Delphine is on her way. Though the doctor has no more hope, Rastignac and Bianchon want to change Goriot's shirt and bedding so that he can die with greater dignity. When Rastignac goes downstairs to ask Madame Vauquer for help, she demands payment for the sheets and other sundries, but she finally sends Sylvie upstairs to assist the men.

Delphine chooses to believe what she wants to believe, another example of someone preferring self-delusion and self-flattery over reality. Madame Vauquer's selfish reaction to Rastignac's request further confirms Balzac's argument that all people are generally self-serving, though Rastignac's and Bianchon's faithful labors are a quiet exception to the rule.

As Rastignac and Bianchon struggle to change Goriot's soiled shirt, Goriot asks, with inarticulate gestures, for the locket containing his daughters' hair. The locket replaced, Goriot finally gives a sigh of contentment, his expression turned from agony to joy. As Sylvie grudgingly changes the sheets, Rastignac and Bianchon, both crying, support the dying man's weak frame. Mistaking the two for his daughters, Goriot grasps both young men by the hair, whispers, "Ah! My angels!", and passes into unconsciousness.

In a tragic deathbed scene, Goriot's self-delusion endures to the end—his need to believe in his daughters' love outweighs his need to acknowledge the truth. Within Goriot's dying thoughts, Rastignac and Bianchon represent the devotion and love that he longed to receive from his daughters all along.

Delphine's maid arrives just then, asking for Rastignac—Delphine has fainted after a heated argument with her husband over money for her father's care. Then, Madame de Restaud arrives. She kisses Goriot's lifeless hand and asks for forgiveness. She tells Rastignac that she cannot possibly be more miserable. She has finally been disillusioned, as Monsieur de Trailles, her lover, has also abandoned her. A short time later, Goriot is dead.

In the end, one of Goriot's daughters does come to his bedside, so he isn't completely abandoned—although it's too late for it to matter to him. Both daughters remain entangled in financial problems and loveless, superficial marriages.

When Rastignac and Bianchon finally come downstairs for a bite of dinner, the other boarders don't want to hear about Goriot and soon lapse into random chatter. The two young men are horrified by their indifference. They find a priest to pray over Goriot's body that night. The next morning, even after pooling their money, they barely have enough left over to cover the most basic shroud and coffin—the sons-in-law have sent no money.

The other boarders remain selfishly oblivious to what's just transpired upstairs, preferring to remain wrapped up in their own superficial lives. In the end, the two young students have to stand in as Goriot's family members.

When Rastignac goes to check on Delphine and Anastasie later that day, neither of them will receive his call; he's told that both are in deep mourning. Finally, Rastignac knows enough about Paris society to not press his luck. He leaves a note for Delphine, asking her to sell some jewelry for the burial, but the Baron throws it into the fire. When Rastignac returns to the boarding house, he cries at the sight of Goriot's shabby coffin resting in front of the gates. Bianchon has left a note that they can't even afford a full Mass for the old man; they'll have to make do with a shorter burial service. Rastignac sees Madame Vauquer toying with Goriot's gold locket and takes it back.

Ironically, though Anastasie and Delphine women couldn't be bothered to provide for their father's care, they use his death for their own selfish purposes much as they used his life. Rastignac is the only one to demonstrate genuine grief for Goriot. Tragically, money remains the measure of Goriot's life, as his burial can only be attended with as much honor as the young men can afford.

When the hearse comes, only Rastignac and Christophe accompany it to the churchyard. Christophe speaks kindly of Goriot as the two wait for the priest. After the brief service, Goriot's body is borne to the cemetery, followed by the carriages of the de Restauds and the de Nucingens. But only the family servants occupy the carriages. The servants stand with Rastignac and Christophe while the gravediggers hastily throw some dirt over the coffin and then wait for their tips. Rastignac has to ask Christophe for a loan, and he stands there crying after the others leave.

Only Christophe and Rastignac are there to mourn for Goriot and to display genuine emotion over his death. His daughters' expressions of mourning are a mere empty show, as is expected by this point.

Alone, Rastignac walks to the highest point of the cemetery and overlooks Paris. He thinks about the society he's fought so hard to enter. With a hungry look, he speaks to the city below him, "It's between the two of us now!" Then, he goes to dine with Madame de Nucingen.

The novel's conclusion is ambiguous. Rastignac has been disillusioned about the nature of Paris society, and his closing words sound like a declaration of war on the city's pretenses. Yet he still desires it, too—and his last act in the book is to go back to his lover, even knowing what a shallow woman she is. Rastignac knows that the society he's finally succeeded in entering is corrupt and insincere. The question remains whether he'll overcome its influence or whether he'll end up being its victim, too.

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