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“He had been deceived this one last time”: The Social Climb and Sacrifices in *Père Goriot*

Père Goriot takes the notion of parental sacrifice to the extreme. The sacrifices he makes for his daughters, which are not mutually beneficial in the least, rob him of everything he has. Even though Goriot was more than generous with his daughters' dowries, they still come to him for money. Goriot is “a victim of his own generosity and the selfishness of others” (Ashmun 524). Unable to say no, he continues to provide for his daughters until the time of his death. Père Goriot's deterioration works in direct correlation with how much he gives to his daughters. However, no matter how much of himself he gives to them, they do not return the love or respect owed to him for all that he does. Père Goriot's sacrifices, and the unrequited love he has for his daughters, affect him physically and lead to his downfall. His sacrifices and over-exaggerated giving seem like an attempt to shield his daughters from the environment their newfound wealth has projected them into. Goriot's downfall is a sure sign that he was never meant to be a part of high society in the first place.

When the reader first meets Goriot in the pension, he is a well-to-do man. He boards in one of the expensive rooms, has a magnificent wardrobe, wears a gold chain, and owns a fine silver dining set (Balzac 17). He is a man for whom large sums of money do not mean much. However, Balzac's attempts to paint Goriot as a wealthy man make him appear gaudy. Goriot has catapulted himself into high society, but Balzac's depiction of him seems like a desperate attempt to ensure the reader knows without a doubt that Goriot has money. If he'd always had

money, his status would be more natural and require less effort to illustrate. Although his fortune affords him a place near the upper class, it is not a position that comes naturally to him. Not everyone is perturbed by Goriot's new money and therefore foreign station in the upper stratum. Goriot appears so well-off in the story's beginning that the owner of the pension, Madame Vauquer, hatches a plan to marry Goriot and live a life that her income at the pension cannot afford. After her intentions are not reciprocated, she is bitter at Goriot's continued presence in her boardinghouse. However, Goriot is oblivious to all that goes on around him in the pension. His only concerns, as the reader later discovers, are his daughters.

Initially, Père Goriot would be described as "the incarnation of biological paternity" (Beizer 120). Goriot's unhealthy infatuation with his daughters began with the death of his wife. His wife acted as a sort of conduit between Goriot and society, but with her death, "his passionate love for his wife, defeated by death, was transferred to his two daughters" (Balzac 70). His wife's absence brings with it one less barrier between his daughters and the cruelty of the upper class. Goriot's wife may have been a conduit between Goriot and the "real world," but she likely filled the same role for her daughters. Without her there to ease her family's transition into the upper class and new money, Goriot has to take on the responsibility himself, a task he fails at. In raising his daughters, Goriot takes it upon himself to be the "Christ de la paternité" (Baran 14). To make his daughters happy, "he saw he simply had to sacrifice himself, so sacrifice himself he did" (Balzac 61). On top of providing his daughters with sizeable dowries, Goriot allowed them to choose who they wanted to marry. His primary goal is to make sure his daughters are happy. Vautrin says, "He's such an old fool that he'll ruin himself for love of his daughters" (Balzac 34). In his attempt to act as a channel between his daughters and the upper class, ruin himself is exactly what Goriot does.

Within a page of Goriot's daughters' first visits to him at the pension, Goriot's appearance begins to deteriorate. First, he asks Madame Vauquer to move to a room upstairs so that he can lower his rent. As time passes, "he stopped using tobacco, gave up his barber, and no longer powdered his hair" (Balzac 24). Delphine and Anastasie only have a relationship with their father when they need something. In speaking of the daughters, Baran states, "Like leeches, Anastasie and Delphine both fasten themselves to their wealthy father to suck him dry" (Baran 7). They also allow their husbands to abuse their father. In fact, their status in society can be attributed to "a process of substitution in which the child literally appropriates his parent's life" (Fiske 85). Delphine and Anastasie take such advantage of their father that "the glamour of the daughters and the squalor of the father are functions of each other" (Prendergast 75). Goriot's destitution is a direct result of his daughters' continuous abuse of him. Anastasie and Delphine have made no pains to hide the fact that they want to be a part of the upper class. Their choices in husband are made specifically for what those men have to offer, so it is no surprise when the marriages are ultimately unhappy ones. Money is a necessity for being a part of the upper social stratum. His daughters want to be upper class, so Goriot funds their quest.

The more his daughters visit him, the more dejected Goriot becomes. His funds dwindle rapidly as he sells all that he has in order to provide his daughters with the money they need. He is forced to give away everything for them, including his precious silver dining set. When his money dries up, his daughters face the threat of possibly losing the status they have attained. Goriot's dejection is in direct response to their unhappiness that the "bank" has run out. He is able to see only that he has failed them. Rastignac tells Goriot that Delphine is the daughter who loves him more (Balzac 102). Delphine is also the daughter that admits that she and her sister "have eaten him alive" (Balzac 113). However, she still continues to go to him when she needs

help. The daughters' selfishness stems from the fact that Goriot denied his daughters nothing as they grew up. He elevates them to a station they should not have being part of the merchant class, and with his "fortune buys his daughters' entry ticket into high society" (Prendergast 75). He enables his daughters to abuse him through his constant over-generosity. In purchasing his daughters' way into a morally corrupt class, he in turn raises daughters that do not seem to have a moral compass of their own. Delphine shows minimal regret, but still continues to abuse him. Despite his wealth, Goriot has no business trying to elevate his daughters to a class he and they are unprepared for.

Goriot does not give voice to his awareness of his daughters' abuse of him until he is on his deathbed. While he is dying, he tells Rastignac, "don't get married, don't have children! You give them life, and they give you death. You bring them into the world, they chase you out of it" (Balzac 202). Goriot knows exactly what his daughters are doing to him. Even after he admits to their taking advantage of him, he still speaks of them fondly and wishes to see them. He knows exactly what his mission to propel his daughters into high society has done to him. In this, Goriot becomes "that ignoble King Lear, who in his extraordinary passion of paternal love rouses our sympathies, in spite of his many absurdities and shortcomings" (Sandars 173). What is so absurd about Père Goriot is that he never once denies his daughters a thing, even though he knows his means of providing for them are dwindling rapidly. However, the reader still feels sympathy for him because his daughters never give him the love he wants. They simply continue to use him until he dies. What is sad about his situation is that he kills himself to protect his daughters from the viciousness of the class they want to be a part of. Had he protected them properly from the start, say by choosing suitable husbands for them, his actions would have been unnecessary. His downfall comes only as a consequence of his being too oblivious to the ways of the upper class.

One of the last instances of Anastasie and Delphine's horrible treatment of their father is the fact that they "are decked in diamonds bought or redeemed with their father's last money, while he lies dying in the meanest room of the Pension Vauquer" (Brooks 216). As Goriot lies dying, his daughters do not visit him because he is dying, but because they want more money from him. When Goriot finally dies after a drawn out deterioration and death, the women do not even go to his funeral. An "old man abandoned to the selfish ingratitude of his two daughters," he is completely deserted by his daughters even in death (Pugh 519). Anastasie and Delphine are literally the cause of Goriot's death, yet they still could not be bothered to pay their respects to him after all he did for them. Goriot's unreturned love and devotion to his daughters leads to his unfortunate death. Anastasie and Delphine seem to have made the full transition to the upper class if their only grief for the death of their father comes from the fact that they will no longer have an easy source of income. Goriot finally succumbs to the upper class he was unprepared for, his daughters' absence at his deathbed a cruel mockery of all he has done for them.

Père Goriot's obnoxious generosity and imagined paternal duties identify him as one of Balzac's types. His acts of sacrifice are so ridiculous at points that they would take away from the seriousness of the story if he was not meant to typify the ultimate martyr. The gravity of his sacrifices are meant to liken him to Jesus. However, Jesus intentionally chose to die. Goriot had no intention of dying when he gave to freely to his daughters. He gave everything he had to them because he wanted them to love him in return. His attempts to protect them from the vicious upper class are unsuccessful. His daughters' callousness and complete disregard of their father seem almost unnatural, but fit in perfectly with what Balzac describes of high society. Goriot's only reprieve was in the fact that he was able to treat Rastignac like a son. Rastignac is the only one of Goriot's "children" who wants something from him other than money. Unfortunately,

Goriot fails himself again by trying to initiate Rastignac into high society in the same way he tried to with his daughters. Rastignac seems to quickly lose some of his morality in the short time he is acquainted with the upper stratum. Whether he would have remained with Goriot after his full integration into high society or turned out like Goriot's daughters is questionable. Despite the attention and affection that Rastignac shows Goriot, it is not enough to stave off Goriot's death that is brought on by his daughters. Goriot ultimately loses his battle of protecting his daughters and becoming a part of the upper class.

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