

Trousers That Are Not Trousers: The Primacy of Materiality in Balzac's Paris

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Honoré de Balzac's 1835 novel, *Le Père Goriot*, is the tragic story of a father whose obsessive love for his two daughters leads to his financial and personal ruin. Interwoven with this theme is that of the young aristocrat, Eugène de Rastignac, who came to Paris to become educated and make his fortune. He befriends Goriot and becomes involved with the daughters. These lives all coalesce around a boarding house, La Maison Vauquelin, that was of central importance to Balzac; it was the appearances that could be obtained with money, the destinies that could be unlocked by real material things and the power they signified. My talk aims to underscore the primacy and the role of materiality as a societal force in Restoration Paris by using examples from Balzac's *Père Goriot*. More specifically, I intend to share ideas on the ways in which Balzac, who was intimately acquainted with the hierarchy of wealth in Restoration society, revealed the veiled contours of wealth through the lens of all feelings, beliefs, and mores: is gold and its subsequent material benefits.

This emphasis on truth and realistic representation of environment was not intended to merely copy reality but represented an aesthetic tool to infiltrate and reflect the essence of a phenomenon, social, historical, or otherwise. Literary realism made it possible to reveal the traits of a particular temporal context.

The distinct cognizance of economic and social realities in *La Comédie humaine* is strikingly similar to the necessary and universal emphasis on economics and the material in the works of Marx and Engels. In the preface to the 1888 English translation of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels identifies the fundamental proposition which forms the nucleus of the work, stating that, "In every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained the political and intellectual history of that epoch, that consequently the whole history of mankind...has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes" (*The Communist Manifesto* 5).

This systematic approach to human history carries a Balzacian resonance, in which the prevailing mode of economic production and its material implications comprise the social substructure, the motor that puts the whole of society into motion. It is no secret that both Marx and Engels were fans of and influenced by

literary realism. Karl Marx, who praised “the present splendid brotherhood of fiction-

Eugène's immediate plan upon receiving an infusion of cash is to acquire new trousers, so that he might be

most prized possession. As he unpacks his belongings at La Maison, Goriot reveals “a platter and a small dish

personal ambition, and materiality