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EUGENIE GRANDET (1833-1834)

Honore de Balzac. 1799-1850

OVERVIEW

Eugenie Grandet is a vast historical novel which never the less concentrates its scope on a small nucleus of interrelated family and connections who largely hail from the Loire River city of Saumur, as well as from Paris. Vast is perhaps the notion that needs explaining. There were novelists whose canvasses covered huge extents of geography and great populations—Tolstoy or Sir Walter Scott come to mind— then there were, in the novel-rich nineteenth century—fiction writers who made the details of family development and conflict of such monumental depth that we experience them virtually as of huge geospatial importance. As with *Le pere Gorio*t, another large fiction that sweeps the human landscape, we feel that in *Eugenie Grandet* we plunge into the deepest recesses of the human darkness. The interior of M. Grandet's soul contains, for example, valleys of introversion than which none deeper or darker have been traversed.

Author Balzac was a genius at using his own experience to create 'a world of coherent details', a world with which he is intimately familiar. Eugenie Grandet herself is deeply grounded in the territory surrounding the city of Saumur; Balzac himself was brought up in Tours, six miles away, in rolling agricultural land; land through which the Loire River, with its bordering chateaux peacefully passes. While vineyards claim first place in the traits of that land, and the capital accruing therefrom forms the driving force of the development of that region, there is also a large outcropping of small villages, intimate marketing centers which dower with produce the residents of this still in some ways mediaeval survival from mid-south France ,leading as they do a prosperous but in some respects ancient lifestyle. When it comes to characterizing the fit of landscape to culture and architecture, Balzac has no equal. As he has no equal in characterizing the mood of a mediaeval stone village as it carves itself out of the shaggy rock faces of the French cliffs. The author's narrative leads the reader in and out through the streets of Saumur, at a deliberate descriptive pace that leaves adequate meditative openness to live into the reality of the mediaeval monastery and the cathedral splendors of Saumur Center City. Balzac's interiorization, of this other I which is the landscape is universally inward turned, into the individuals who speak it.

Text It was while writing *Eugenie Grandet* that Balzac conceived the notion of a long series of interwoven novels, which would undertake to describe the species and specific natures of the main types of human personnage, as well as of the types of the most commonly found personnages.) On this matter, Balzac follows the thinking of the great French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), whose generic thinking provided a template for much of the time's thinking in the sociology of the Humanities. For Balzac classification required an intricate attention to personal types, but at the same time to the minutiae of individual differences.

In literary terms, the end result of this sociological plotting of a vast literary opus—The *Comedie Humaine*-- was complex: familiar characters appear in unfamiliar settings, while at other times unexpected types appear in familiar settings. Preoccupations familiar to our own contemporary literature dance through Balzac's perspective. Our various contemporary concerns, with the nature of the individual and the qualifications of art for defining him, are put vividly on display by our efforts to locate particular characters within the roster of the Comedie Humaine.

Background Balzac was a child of the French Revolution, and although he remained a faithful adherent to the Catholic Church, and by and large a social and political conservative, he remained steadily aware of the drama of passing time, and of the vulnerability of the individual to the forces that sweep us all along. The bulk of his writing life was carried out in Paris in the atmosphere of the restored Bourbon Monarchy (Louis XVIII and Charles X). This socially and politically regressive milieu, which Balzac valued, made for the powerful gestures of the conservative imagination. Hearking back to a socio

cultural world which transported old values, social obligations, Balzac found both in Paris, and in his ancient insights into French tradition, the prime matter for his supremely daring *Comedie humaine*. Like Dickens, Thackeray, or Jane Aosten, on the other side of the channel, Balzac grasped both the social cultural innovation which was sweeping his time, and the depth of traditional values which were being brought to reconsideration by the plough of time.

What is great about Balzac's work?

We should divide our query into four categories of greatness: *greatness of setting; greatness of characterization; greatness of world-perspective*; *greatness of historical sense.*

Greatness of setting. Balzac is so natural a story teller that one is beguiled by him, into thinking that art is nature, and that the aesthetically fabricated is as natural as the tree in the front yard. From the earliest western literature it has been assumed that the great author stays out of the way of what he is telling you. It is 'the voice' that is suddenly accessible and shaping , as though he or she, or perhaps simply a person-like presence, is beside you making story, or perhaps we should say 'becoming story.' Homer is the name we give to the maker of the most natural seeming of voices in our historical repertoire. Homer will have passed, as voice and lyre and backgrounds of male feasting dactyl sound, into the listeners' ears, for whom the landscape meant to generate man, *andra,*Odysseus to those familiar with the forthgoing of the words' magic presence. For those to whom the first lines Homer became had only magic to blame, foe unfolding of their learning or remembering. While Balzac can slip up on us with an equal neatness, when it comes to establishing a setting. Meaningful domestic events can be introduced with such deftness that we don't realize we have become them.

Greatness of characterization. In the present novel Balzac cuts back his classy taste for vast numbers of characters, the unfolding sheet of interinvolved characters, say, that form the tapestry of *Le Pere Goriot*. (It will be recalled that in *Goriot* considerable attention—the lengthy introduction to Mme. Vauquer's boarding house—is given to introducing the personnel and environment. We can feel the creator's mind, in the background, as he enlarges the cast of characters, introducing Goriot's daughters, onto whom he will fittingly, in their time, graft their elite mates, or sending the social climber Rastignac out into the social world to introduce new characters into the growing network of social relations. These structural strategies are the broad test of Balzac's character architectonic, but they are only the frame laying on which each ingeniously crafted character can be placed. That placing-building is carried out with tact, building person after person. One need only look at the incremental process by which Balzac prepares us for the advent of each character, as though sketching them line by line. Felix Grandet is only gradually introduced, as an emergent figure in an 'historical landscape,' the abundance and potential of which is gradually drawn closer in toward the *pater familias*. By the time we meet Felix up front and personal, he is preformed without further ado. We are ready to take on the classic miserly scratchiness without further ado. The remainder of the novel gives us ample room to discover Eugenie as a kind of anti Felix, and to add in enough already anticipated spice—Charles and Nanon--to keep alive electrical poles between which conversation can pass.

Greatness of world-perspective. The greatness trait here has to do with scope and embrace, the desired magnitude of concept with which the novelist in the modern era—industrial, communicative, realities-alert fictive universe of our post 1800 world—feels compelled to seek equality with what is given him. Balzac, of course, is writing of a backwater provincial life from which he is distant, though he was himself raised in Tours, a few miles from Saumur, and during a swathe of time not greatly different from that occupying the novel he is writing. The writing is being carried on in Paris, where the tone setting belongs to what we now call the July Monarchy. The world-perspective greatness we assay, in other words, derives from the capacity to read your own world against another and parallel world, the adroit adaptability we seem to find Balzac mastering.

The notion of the *Comedie Humaine* occurs to Balzac during the writing of *Eugenie Grandet*; then Balzac formulated to himself the idea of writing a sequence of more than one hundred texts—mostly novels—devoted to multiple aspects of society in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. His fervor of ambition, and his passion to release a world perspective, drove hin into the enterprise which was to rival Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The parallel to Dante's epic shocks by its audacity, for though

Dante had the edifice of Catholic theology to construct against, Balzac had nothing beside his own secular imagination and world perspective to undergird such a vast undertaking.

Greatness of historical sense Balzac was an intensely self-educated young man. On detention gigs, when his schoolmaster wanted to calm him down, Balzac found his way to the school library, and would read voraciously in whatever texts or reference books he could find. In *La Peau de* Chagrin Raphael happens on a Curiosity Shop in which his mind enters a phantasmagoria of world culture historical objects, texts and objets d'art of priceless value. He is in a world made by the history of the mind. His own mind fills that world whenever possible, as we note from the assiduity with which he plunged into studies at the Sorbonne after arriving in Paris. All of which cultural fervors show at their most intricate in the historical sense Balzac puts to use in the historical placing of the Saumur tale in *Eugenie Grandet*. That Saumur tale refers, naturally, to the opening pages of *Eugenie Grandet.* Balzac has adopted a plural stance toward the reader, with whom he is accompanying himself as he inwardly palps the cold stony facades of the ground level openings onto the cobble stone streets of Saumur. For Balzac, kindred as he is to history on his fingers, and in the ocular of cold gray mediaeval stone, history prvovokes us through the pages of a book which scrapes our fingers like gray stone.

SCENES

Grandet accrues more wealth*.* Wealth for Grandet from estates of his mother in law and grandfather in law. Grandet puts his mansion off limits. Only the banker, the notary, and the familys are given access to the house. The house becomes fortress like. It is ancient and cold.

Grandet ages The notary and the banker remind Grandet that his daughter is nearing the age of inheriting from dad. We see the storm clouds of financial disorder on the horizon. We know that Eugenie is to inherit her mother's wealth.

Community interest grows, in the potential inheritor of Eugenie **herself**. The two chief candidates are Cruchot's nephew, and the son of Des Grassins, the banker. A great deal of money is at stake.

Grandet's greed and miserliness increase. Felix Grandet sees to it that his tenants supply their rents in domestic commodities, like the thin slices of bread he prepares every morning. He never purchases out of the market in the village. He never risks his cash, never invests, only sells

Grandet's faithful servant Nanon falls The rotten staircase in the Grandet's house was never repaired. It is of Felix never to waste a louis on the maintenance of his dwelling.

Brother's letter Felix is chatting with the banker and the notary, when there is a fateful knock on the door. The stranger brings a letter from Felix's brother, asking that Felix should help his nephew sail to the Indies. (In an appended note we learn that the brother has gone bankrupt, and is determined to kill himself.) The following day the newspapers announce this suicide and the extent of Guillaume's debts; at all of which the visiting nephew Charles breaks down.

Eugenie visit of Charles*.* While Charles is virtually comatose with shock, Eugenie looks over his letters, and draws the conclusion (false) that Charles has abandoned an older lover for her. This error, preserved intact while Charles will be in the Indies, will be the source of much pain and isolation for the lady.

Charles leaves*;* Eugenie pines for him. When Felix comes to understand the whole backstory of Eugenie's crush on Charles, he is enraged at his daughter; he imprisons her indefinitely in her room, on bread and water.

Felix's wife despairs*, the family is split.* The only softening occurs when the notary reminds Felix that Eugenie, not he, will be the inheritor of great wealth from her mother. Felix's daughter will become the power figure.

Felix's wife dies. Loneliness takes over the mansion. Felix slowly bilks his daughter out of the money she inherits from her mother Years pass.

Felix dies. The absence of Felix is hardly to be felt. Eugenie lives with the housekeeper and waits for a proper suitor to appear. None comes. Only Eugenie is left. The bitter tale holds out rays of hope, but nothing except hope.

Charles returns wealthy from the Indies, where, having forgotten Eugenia, he settles in Paris, and tries to marry his way into the nobility.

***Eugenia says farewell to Charles,* and marries** The son of the not dies—the marriage not having been consummated.

Eugenia, alone in the mansion with her servant, becomes once again the maiden targeted by the prominent suitors of Saumur.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

M. Grandet, a wealthy cooper, and aeguably the most prominent figure in Saumur. Father of Eugenie Grandet, and an incurable lover of money, which he quite naturally puts before human relations. He belongs with the great misers of literary history—Harpagon and Scrooge.

Mme. Grandet, the lomg suffering wife of Felix Grandet, a staunch supporter of her daughter against the cruelty of her husband. Torn between her daughter, whom she loves, and her husband, whom she both hates and fears.

Eugenie Grandet, daughter of M. Grandet. A country girl with money aplenty, by the end of the novel, but with no luck at finding a mate. She is still looking, at the end of the bitter tale.

Charles Grandet, handsome twenty-four year old nephew of M. Grandet. Upon his nighttime visit to his Uncle in Saumur, he catches the eye of Eugenia, who unfortunately gains the impression that he has left his old girlfriend. She is wrong in thinking he falls for her, fin the end he separates decisively from her.

Nanon faithful family servant; clumsy and placid, but in the end married.

M. de Grassins. Banker in Saumur; close confidant of M. Grandet, and, along with Cruchot, a friend to Grandet.

M. Cruchot, closest friend to Grandet, a well-informed Notary.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Felix Felix is the patriarch of the tale. His caricature greediness and miserliness coincide, from the start of the novel, with the historical moment in which the properties of the Church were being confiscated in the region of Saumur, a small provincial city on the Loire. Felix marries a woman who inherits a fortune in timber, while on his own he assembles huge vineyard properties and a growing business as a cooper. This wealth accumulation coincides with the capital fluidity of the Paris Exchange, to give perfect expression to Felix's insatiable greed. Food and money satisfy all of Felix' needs. The greed in question thrives on itself as Felix rivals misers like Scrooge or Shylock in a narcissism which causes great suffering to those around him. Felix's eventual envy of the fortunes of his wife and daughter arguably leads to the death of the former, and certainly leads to the humiliation of his daughter. This novel is a dark tale, because of the bleakness of personality of Grandet. Through this portraiture, Balzac reinforces the view he regularly exposed, that money itself was ruining French society. The world inhabited by Goriot's daughters, *in Le Pere Goriot*, would provide a perfect example of this degeneration.

Eugenie Daughter to Felix, Eugenie is trapped by history, largely valued or punished in terms of her position in the mating game. When finally she marries it is to M. Cruchot, son of the notary, who marries her on the agreement that they will not consummate their marriage. At the end of the novel she is still waiting for the right suitor. That last turn of phrase, about waiting for the right suitor, sums up the pathos of Eugenie's life. For all Balzac's skill at characterization, he permits her to remain a pale figure. This of course is the historical position in which she is trapped, stashed away in a provincial town, without siblings or friends.

THEMES

Greed Felix Grandet is preoccupied with money and willing to sacrifice anything for it. From the time we first meet him, he is the master of a miserly house, forever monitoring his vineyards, or working and trading in the sturdy wooden barrels he made and sold as a large percentage of his profit. (The profession of cooper, maker of wine transport barrels, was respected and well repaid in southern France, where it had been held in high esteem since antiquity.) Grandet did all he could to avoid buying produce locally—but instead had his renters pay in produce, with which he could feed the few residents of his mansion. But the extremity of his greedy cruelty emerges in his relations to his family. Vengeful toward Eugenie, after his mistaken impression that she has given his gold coins to Charles, as part of an amorous relationship, Felix locks his daughter up for weeks, providing her only bread and water. His cruelty to his wife kicks in forcefully after the Notary has told him that the lady's wealth will pass directly toward her daughter—and not to her husband. Even the awareness that his railing was driving his wife close to death does not lead Felix to relent, or leave her in peace. In the end his greed is suicidal, leaving him without recourse or friends.

Patience Patience was calamitously needed in the Grandet mansion, particularly when it came to the railings and tantrums of Felix himself. There was no joy to counteract the just post mediaeval gloom that overhung every arch of the ancient residences of Saumur. Perhaps Nanon, the faithful but clumsy servant, was the best fitted person in the house to endure the living death of miserliness. Her loving fidelity to Eugenie is a blessing to each of the two women. Daily life was dreary, and only rarely opens a window onto scenes of domestic pleasure, such as we discover on the night when Charles appears from Paris, when Felix, the notary, and the banker are playing cards. At such moments we catch a rare glimpse of joie de vivre, but there is little of such a break to soften the need for patience. The ultimate in patience is required by the conclusion of the novel, when Eugenie must once more undertake the marital waiting game, now that she is fully aware of the perils of that activity.

Love Neither the erotic nor the romantic figures strongly in E*ugenie Grandet.* Eugenie certainly falls for Charles—who wouldn't in the atmosphere of the Grandet mansion? –but largely replaces any erotic engagement with imaginings and dreams about a Charles who in fact has, in the long run, little interest in her. Not, of course, that Eugenie does not long for Charles. It as to be added, here, that Felix the greedy shows no vestige of desire, sets no example of conviviality even for his fellows.

Torment *In the end happiness eludes all the characters in Eugenie Grandet*. We are, after all, working through scenes of life in a provincial backwater, and at a time when the facilities for life amusement, family diversion, or downtime were minimal. (Rustic games, religious festivals, communal games carried out against agricultural settings; these were the outlets available to regional communities still distant from the small number of growing cities; while a major center of culture and capital, like Paris, represented a sprawling conglomerate indescribably distant from sleepy archaic communities like Saumur.) Not only were the inverted conditions of small town country life favorable to isolation, but the difficulty of communications and the paucity of news sources contributed toward the repetition and boredom of life in the country, at the depiction of which boredom Balzac is a master.