

= Honoré de Balzac =

Honoré de Balzac (/ ˈbɒlˌzæk , ˈbæl- / ; French : [ɔ̃.nɔ̃ʁ.d(ə).bal.zaˈk] , born Honoré Balzac , 20 May 1799 ? 18 August 1850) was a French novelist and playwright . The novel sequence *La Comédie Humaine* , which presents a panorama of post @-@ Napoleonic French life , is generally viewed as his magnum opus .

Owing to his keen observation of detail and unfiltered representation of society , Balzac is regarded as one of the founders of realism in European literature . He is renowned for his multi @-@ faceted characters ; even his lesser characters are complex , morally ambiguous and fully human . Inanimate objects are imbued with character as well ; the city of Paris , a backdrop for much of his writing , takes on many human qualities . His writing influenced many famous writers , including the novelists Émile Zola , Charles Dickens , Gustave Flaubert , Jack Kerouac and Henry James , as well as important philosophers such as Friedrich Engels . Many of Balzac 's works have been made into films , and they continue to inspire other writers .

An enthusiastic reader and independent thinker as a child , Balzac had trouble adapting to the teaching style of his grammar school . His willful nature caused trouble throughout his life and frustrated his ambitions to succeed in the world of business . When he finished school , Balzac was apprenticed in a law office , but he turned his back on the study of law after wearying of its inhumanity and banal routine . Before and during his career as a writer , he attempted to be a publisher , printer , businessman , critic , and politician ; he failed in all of these efforts . *La Comédie Humaine* reflects his real @-@ life difficulties , and includes scenes from his own experience .

Balzac suffered from health problems throughout his life , possibly due to his intense writing schedule . His relationship with his family was often strained by financial and personal drama , and he lost more than one friend over critical reviews . In 1850 , Balzac married Ewelina Hańska , a Polish aristocrat and his longtime love ; he died in Paris five months later .

= = Biography = =

= = = Family = = =

Honoré de Balzac was born into a family which through its industry and efforts aspired to achieve respectability . His father , born Bernard @-@ François Balssa , was one of eleven children from an artisan family in Tarn (Occitanie) , a region in the south of France . In 1760 he set off for Paris with only a Louis coin in his pocket , intent on improving his social standing ; by 1776 he had become Secretary to the King 's Council and a Freemason (he had also changed his name to the more noble sounding " Balzac , " his son later adding ? without official recognition ? the nobiliary particle : " de ") . After the Reign of Terror (1793 ? 94) , François Balzac was despatched to Tours to coordinate supplies for the Army .

Balzac 's mother , born Anne @-@ Charlotte @-@ Laure Sallambier , came from a family of haberdashers in Paris . Her family 's wealth was a considerable factor in the match : she was eighteen at the time of the wedding , and François Balzac fifty . As the author and literary critic Sir Victor Pritchett explained , " She was certainly drily aware that she had been given to an old husband as a reward for his professional services to a friend of her family and that the capital was on her side . She was not in love with her husband " .

Honoré (named after Saint @-@ Honoré of Amiens , who is commemorated on 16 May , four days before Balzac 's birthday) was actually the second child born to the Balzacs ; exactly one year previous , Louis @-@ Daniel had been born , but he lived for only a month . Honoré 's sisters Laure and Laurence were born in 1800 and 1802 , and his younger brother Henry @-@ François in 1807 .

= = = Early life = = =

As an infant Balzac was sent to a wet @-@ nurse ; the following year he was joined by his sister

Laure and they spent four years away from home . (Although Genevan philosopher Jean @-@ Jacques Rousseau 's influential book *Émile* convinced many mothers of the time to nurse their own children , sending babies to wet @-@ nurses was still common among the middle and upper classes .) When the Balzac children returned home , they were kept at a frosty distance from their parents , which affected the author @-@ to @-@ be significantly . His 1835 novel *Le Lys dans la Vallée* features a cruel governess named Miss Caroline , modeled after his own caregiver .

At age ten Balzac was sent to the Oratorian grammar school in Vendôme , where he studied for seven years . His father , seeking to instill the same hardscrabble work ethic which had gained him the esteem of society , intentionally gave little spending money to the boy . This made him the object of ridicule among his much wealthier schoolmates .

Balzac had difficulty adapting to the rote style of learning at the school . As a result , he was frequently sent to the " alcove " , a punishment cell reserved for disobedient students . (The janitor at the school , when asked later if he remembered Honoré , replied : " Remember M. Balzac ? I should think I do ! I had the honour of escorting him to the dungeon more than a hundred times ! ") Still , his time alone gave the boy ample freedom to read every book which came his way .

Balzac worked these scenes from his boyhood ? as he did many aspects of his life and the lives of those around him ? into *La Comédie Humaine* . His time at Vendôme is reflected in *Louis Lambert* , his 1832 novel about a young boy studying at an Oratorian grammar school at Vendôme . The narrator says : " He devoured books of every kind , feeding indiscriminately on religious works , history and literature , philosophy and physics . He had told me that he found indescribable delight in reading dictionaries for lack of other books . "

Balzac often fell ill , finally causing the headmaster to contact his family with news of a " sort of a coma " . When he returned home , his grandmother said : " Voilà donc comme le collège nous renvoie les jolis que nous lui envoyons ! " (" Look how the academy returns the pretty ones we send them ! ") Balzac himself attributed his condition to " intellectual congestion " , but his extended confinement in the " alcove " was surely a factor . (Meanwhile , his father had been writing a treatise on " the means of preventing thefts and murders , and of restoring the men who commit them to a useful role in society " , in which he heaped disdain on prison as a form of crime prevention .)

In 1814 the Balzac family moved to Paris , and Honoré was sent to private tutors and schools for the next two and a half years . This was an unhappy time in his life , during which he attempted suicide on a bridge over the Loire River .

In 1816 Balzac entered the Sorbonne , where he studied under three famous professors : François Guizot , who later became Prime Minister , was Professor of Modern History ; Abel @-@ François Villemain , a recent arrival from the Collège Charlemagne , lectured on French and classical literature ; and , most influential of all , Victor Cousin 's courses on philosophy encouraged his students to think independently .

Once his studies were completed , Balzac was persuaded by his father to follow him into the Law ; for three years he trained and worked at the office of Victor Passez , a family friend . During this time Balzac began to understand the vagaries of human nature . In his 1840 novel *Le Notaire* , he wrote that a young person in the legal profession sees " the oily wheels of every fortune , the hideous wrangling of heirs over corpses not yet cold , the human heart grappling with the Penal Code . "

In 1819 Passez offered to make Balzac his successor , but his apprentice had had enough of the Law . He despaired of being " a clerk , a machine , a riding @-@ school hack , eating and drinking and sleeping at fixed hours . I should be like everyone else . And that 's what they call living , that life at the grindstone , doing the same thing over and over again I am hungry and nothing is offered to appease my appetite " . He announced his intention to become a writer .

The loss of this opportunity caused serious discord in the Balzac household , although Honoré was not turned away entirely . Instead , in April 1819 he was allowed to live in the French capital ? as English critic George Saintsbury describes it ? " in a garret furnished in the most Spartan fashion , with a starvation allowance and an old woman to look after him " , while the rest of the family moved to a house twenty miles [32 km] outside Paris .

= = = First literary efforts = = =

Balzac 's first project was a libretto for a comic opera called *Le Corsaire* , based on Lord Byron 's *The Corsair* . Realizing he would have trouble finding a composer , however , he turned to other pursuits .

In 1820 Balzac completed the five @-@ act verse tragedy *Cromwell* . Although it pales by comparison with his later works , some critics consider it a quality text . When he finished , Balzac went to Villeparisis and read the entire work to his family ; they were unimpressed . He followed this effort by starting (but never finishing) three novels : *Sténie* , *Falturne* , and *Corsino* .

In 1821 Balzac met the enterprising Auguste Le Poitevin , who convinced the author to write short stories , which Le Poitevin would then sell to publishers . Balzac quickly turned to longer works , and by 1826 he had written nine novels , all published under pseudonyms and often produced in collaboration with other writers . For example , the scandalous novel *Vicaire des Ardennes* (1822) ? banned for its depiction of nearly @-@ incestuous relations and , more egregiously , of a married priest ? attributed to a " Horace de Saint @-@ Aubin " . These books were potboiler novels , designed to sell quickly and titillate audiences . In Saintsbury 's view , " they are curiously , interestingly , almost enthrallingly bad " . Saintsbury indicates that Robert Louis Stevenson tried to dissuade him from reading these early works of Balzac . American critic Samuel Rogers , however , notes that " without the training they gave Balzac , as he groped his way to his mature conception of the novel , and without the habit he formed as a young man of writing under pressure , one can hardly imagine his producing *La Comédie Humaine* " . Biographer Graham Robb suggests that as he discovered the Novel , Balzac discovered himself .

During this time Balzac wrote two pamphlets in support of primogeniture and the Society of Jesus . The latter , regarding the Jesuits , illustrated his lifelong admiration for the Catholic Church . In the preface to *La Comédie Humaine* he wrote : " Christianity , above all , Catholicism , being ... a complete system for the repression of the depraved tendencies of man , is the most powerful element of social order " .

= = = " Une bonne spéculation " = = =

In the late 1820s Balzac dabbled in several business ventures , a penchant his sister blamed on the temptation of an unknown neighbour . His first enterprise was in publishing which turned out cheap one @-@ volume editions of French classics including the works of Molière . This business failed miserably , with many of the books " sold as waste paper " . Balzac had better luck publishing the *Memoirs of the Duchess of Abrantès* , with whom he also had a love affair .

Balzac borrowed money from his family and friends , and tried to build a printing business , then a typefounder enterprise . His inexperience and lack of capital caused his ruin in these trades . He gave the businesses to a friend (who made them successful) but carried the debts for many years . As of April 1828 Balzac owed 50 @,@ 000 francs to his mother .

Balzac never lost his penchant for une bonne spéculation . It resurfaced painfully later when ? as a renowned and busy author ? he traveled to Sardinia in the hopes of reprocessing the slag from the Roman mines there . Near the end of his life Balzac was captivated by the idea of cutting 20 @,@ 000 acres (81 km²) of oak wood in Ukraine and transporting it for sale in France .

= = = *La Comédie Humaine* and literary success = = =

After writing several novels , in 1832 Balzac conceived the idea for an enormous series of books that would paint a panoramic portrait of " all aspects of society " . The moment the idea came to him , Balzac raced to his sister 's apartment and proclaimed : " I am about to become a genius " ! Although he originally called it *Etudes des M?urs* (Study of Mores) , it eventually became known as *La Comédie Humaine* , and he included in it all the fiction that he had published in his lifetime under his own name . This was to be Balzac 's life work and his greatest achievement .

After the collapse of his businesses , Balzac traveled to Brittany and stayed with the De Pommereul family outside Fougères . There he drew inspiration for *Les Chouans* (1829) , a tale of love gone

wrong amid the Chouan royalist forces . Although Balzac was a supporter of the Crown , Balzac paints the counter @-@ revolutionaries in a sympathetic light ? even though they are the center of the book 's most brutal scenes . This was the first book Balzac released under his own name , and it gave him what one critic called " passage into the Promised Land " . It established him as an author of note (even if its historical fiction @-@ genre imitates that of Sir Walter Scott) and provided him with a name outside his past pseudonyms .

Soon afterwards , around the time of his father 's death , Balzac wrote *El Verdugo* ? about a 30 @-@ year @-@ old man who kills his father (Balzac was 30 years old at the time) . This was the first work signed " Honoré de Balzac " . He followed his father in the surname Balzac but added the aristocratic @-@ sounding nobiliary particle to help him fit into respected society , a choice based on skill rather than by right . " The aristocracy and authority of talent are more substantial than the aristocracy of names and material power " , he wrote in 1830 . The timing of the decision was also significant ; as Robb explained : " The disappearance of the father coincides with the adoption of the nobiliary particle . A symbolic inheritance . " Just as his father had worked his way up from poverty into respectable society , Balzac considered toil and effort his real mark of nobility .

When the July Revolution overthrew Charles X in 1830 , Balzac declared himself a Legitimist , supporting King Charles ' Royal House of Bourbon , but not without qualifications . He felt that the new July Monarchy (which claimed widespread popular support) was disorganized and unprincipled , in need of a mediator to keep the political peace between the King and insurgent forces . He called for " a young and vigorous man who belongs neither to the Directoire nor to the Empire , but who is 1830 incarnate " He planned to be such a candidate , appealing especially to the higher classes in Chinon . But after a near @-@ fatal accident in 1832 (he slipped and cracked his head on the street) , Balzac decided not to stand for election .

1831 saw the success of *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass 's Skin* or *The Magic Skin*) , a fable @-@ like tale about a despondent young man named Raphaël de Valentin who finds an animal skin which promises great power and wealth . He obtains these things , but loses the ability to manage them . In the end , his health fails and he is consumed by his own confusion . Balzac meant the story to bear witness to the treacherous turns of life , its " serpentine motion " .

In 1833 Balzac released *Eugénie Grandet* , his first best @-@ seller . The tale of a young lady who inherits her father 's miserliness , it also became the most critically acclaimed book of his career . The writing is simple , yet the individuals (especially the bourgeois title character) are dynamic and complex .

Le Père Goriot (*Old Father Goriot* , 1835) was his next success , in which Balzac transposes the story of King Lear to 1820s Paris in order to rage at a society bereft of all love save the love of money . The centrality of a father in this novel matches Balzac 's own position ? not only as mentor to his troubled young secretary , Jules Sandeau , but also the fact that he had fathered a child , Marie @-@ Caroline Du Fresnay , with his otherwise @-@ married lover , Maria Du Fresnay , who had been his source of inspiration for *Eugénie Grandet* .

In 1836 Balzac took the helm of the *Chronique de Paris* , a weekly magazine of society and politics . He tried to enforce strict impartiality in its pages and a reasoned assessment of various ideologies . As Rogers notes , " Balzac was interested in any social , political , or economic theory , whether from the right or the left . " The magazine failed , but in July 1840 he founded another publication , the *Revue Parisienne* . It produced three issues .

These dismal business efforts ? and his misadventures in Sardinia ? provided an appropriate milieu in which to set the two @-@ volume *Illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions* , 1843) . The novel concerns Lucien de Rubempré , a young poet trying to make a name for himself , who becomes trapped in the morass of society 's darkest contradictions . Lucien 's journalistic work is informed by Balzac 's own failed ventures in the field . *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (*The Harlot High and Low* , 1847) continues Lucien 's story . He is trapped by the Abbé Herrera (*Vautrin*) in a convoluted and disastrous plan to regain social status . The book undergoes a massive temporal rift ; the first part (of four) covers a span of six years , while the final two sections focus on just three days .

Le Cousin Pons (1847) and *La Cousine Bette* (1848) tell the story of *Les Parents Pauvres* (*The Poor Relations*) . The conniving and wrangling over wills and inheritances reflect the expertise

gained by the author as a young law clerk . Balzac 's health was deteriorating by this point , making the completion of this pair of books a significant accomplishment .

Many of his novels were initially serialized , like those of Dickens . Their length was not predetermined . *Illusions Perdues* extends to a thousand pages after starting inauspiciously in a small @-@ town print shop , whereas *La Fille aux yeux d 'or* (*The Girl with the Golden Eyes* , 1835) opens with a broad panorama of Paris but becomes a closely plotted novella of only fifty pages .

= = = Work habits = = =

Balzac 's work habits are legendary ? he did not work quickly , but toiled with an incredible focus and dedication . His preferred method was to eat a light meal at five or six in the afternoon , then sleep until midnight . He then rose and wrote for many hours , fueled by innumerable cups of black coffee . He would often work for fifteen hours or more at a stretch ; he claimed to have once worked for 48 hours with only three hours of rest in the middle .

Balzac revised obsessively , covering printer 's proofs with changes and additions to be reset . He sometimes repeated this process during the publication of a book , causing significant expense both for himself and the publisher . As a result , the finished product quite often was different from the original text . Although some of his books never reached completion , some ? such as *Les employés* (*The Government Clerks* , 1841) ? are nonetheless noted by critics .

Although Balzac was " by turns a hermit and a vagrant " , he managed to stay in tune with the social spheres which nourished his writing . He was friends with Théophile Gautier and Pierre @-@ Marie @-@ Charles de Bernard du Grail de la Villette , and he was acquainted with Victor Hugo . Nevertheless , he did not spend as much time in salons and clubs of Paris like many of his characters . " In the first place he was too busy " , explains Saintsbury , " in the second he would not have been at home there [H] e felt it was his business not to frequent society but to create it " . However he often spent long periods at the Château de Saché , near Tours , the home of his friend Jean de Margonne , his mother 's lover and father to her youngest child . Many of Balzac 's tormented characters were conceived in the chateau 's small second @-@ floor bedroom . Today the chateau is a museum dedicated to the author 's life .

= = = Marriage and sentimental life = = =

In 1833 , as he revealed in a letter to his sister , Balzac entered into an illicit affair with fellow writer Maria Du Fresnay , who was then aged 24 . Her marriage to a considerably older man (Charles du Fresnay , Mayor of Sartrouville) had been a failure from the outset . In this letter , Balzac also reveals that the young woman had just come to tell him she was pregnant with his child . In 1834 , 8 months after the event , Maria Du Fresnay 's daughter by Balzac , Marie @-@ Caroline Du Fresnay , was born . This revelation from French journalist Roger Pierrot in 1955 confirmed what was already suspected by several historians : the dedicatee of the novel *Eugénie Grandet* , a certain " Maria " , turns out to be Maria Du Fresnay herself .

In February 1832 Balzac received an intriguing letter from Odessa ? with no return address and signed simply " L 'Étrangère " (" The Foreigner ") ? expressing sadness at the cynicism and atheism in *La Peau de Chagrin* and its negative portrayal of women . His response was to place a classified advertisement in the *Gazette de France* , hoping that his anonymous critic would see it . Thus began a fifteen @-@ year correspondence between Balzac and " the object of [his] sweetest dreams " : Ewelina Ha?ska .

Ewelina (née Rzewuska) was married to a nobleman twenty years her senior , Marshal Wac?aw Ha?ski , a wealthy Polish landowner living near Kiev . It had been a marriage of convenience to preserve her family 's fortune . In Balzac Countess Ewelina found a kindred spirit for her emotional and social desires , with the added benefit of feeling a connection to the glamorous capital of France . Their correspondence reveals an intriguing balance of passion , propriety and patience ; Robb says it is " like an experimental novel in which the female protagonist is always trying to pull in extraneous realities but which the hero is determined to keep on course , whatever tricks he has to

use " .

Marshal Ha?ski died in 1841 , and his widow and her admirer finally had the chance to pursue their affections . A rival of the Hungarian composer Franz Liszt , Balzac visited Countess Ha?ska in St. Petersburg in 1843 and won her heart . After a series of financial setbacks , health problems and objections from Tsar Nicholas I , the couple finally received permission to wed . On 14 March 1850 , with Balzac 's health in serious decline , they travelled by carriage from her family seat at Verhivnya Park in Volhynia to St. Barbara 's Catholic Church in Berdychiv (Russia 's former banking city in present @-@ day Ukraine) , where they were married by Abbot O?arowski . The ten @-@ hour journey to and from the ceremony took a toll on both husband and wife : her feet were too swollen to walk , and he endured severe heart trouble .

Although he married late in life , Balzac had already written two treatises on marriage : *Physiologie du Mariage* and *Scènes de la Vie Conjugale* . These works lacked firsthand knowledge ; Saintsbury points out that " c?lebs cannot talk of [marriage] with much authority " . In late April the newly @-@ weds set off for Paris . His health deteriorated on the way , and Ewelina wrote to her daughter about Balzac being " in a state of extreme weakness " and " sweating profusely " . They arrived in the French capital on 20 May , his fifty @-@ first birthday .

Five months after his wedding , on Sunday , 18 August 1850 , Balzac died . His mother was the only one with him when he expired ; Eve de Balzac (formerly Countess Ha?ska) had gone to bed . He had been visited that day by Victor Hugo , who later served as a pallbearer and the eulogist at Balzac 's funeral .

Balzac is buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris . At his memorial service , Victor Hugo pronounced " Today we have people in black because of the death of the man of talent ; a nation in mourning for a man of genius " . The funeral was attended by " almost every writer in Paris " , including Frédéric Lemaître , Gustave Courbet , Dumas père and Dumas fils , as well as representatives of the Légion d'honneur and other dignitaries .

Later , a statue (called the Monument à Balzac) was created by the celebrated French sculptor Auguste Rodin . Cast in bronze , the Balzac Monument has stood since 1939 nearby the intersection of Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard Montparnasse at Place Pablo @-@ Picasso . Rodin featured Balzac in several of his smaller sculptures as well .

= = Writing style = =

The *Comédie Humaine* remained unfinished at the time of his death ? Balzac had plans to include numerous other books , most of which he never started . He frequently flitted between works in progress , and " finished articles " were frequently revised between editions . This piecemeal style is reflective of the author 's own life , a possible attempt to stabilize it through fiction . " The vanishing man " , wrote Sir Victor Pritchett , " who must be pursued from the rue Cassini to ... Versailles , Ville d'Avray , Italy , and Vienna can construct a settled dwelling only in his work " .

= = Realism = =

Balzac 's extensive use of detail , especially the detail of objects , to illustrate the lives of his characters made him an early pioneer of literary realism . While he admired and drew inspiration from the Romantic style of Scottish novelist Walter Scott , Balzac sought to depict human existence through the use of particulars . In the preface to the first edition of *Scènes de la Vie privée* , he wrote : " the author firmly believes that details alone will henceforth determine the merit of works " . Plentiful descriptions of décor , clothing , and possessions help breathe life into the characters . For example , Balzac 's friend Henri de Latouche had a good knowledge of hanging wallpaper . Balzac transferred this to his descriptions of the Pension Vauquer in *Le Père Goriot* , making the wallpaper speak of the identities of those living inside .

Some critics consider Balzac 's writing exemplary of naturalism ? a more pessimistic and analytical form of realism , which seeks to explain human behavior as intrinsically linked with the environment . French novelist Émile Zola declared Balzac the father of the naturalist novel . Zola indicated that

whilst the Romantics saw the world through a colored lens , the naturalist sees through a clear glass ? precisely the sort of effect Balzac attempted to achieve in his works .

= = = = Characters = = = =

Balzac sought to present his characters as real people , neither fully good nor fully evil , but completely human . " To arrive at the truth " , he wrote in the preface to *Le Lys dans la vallée* , " writers use whatever literary device seems capable of giving the greatest intensity of life to their characters " . " Balzac 's characters " , Robb notes , " were as real to him as if he were observing them in the outside world " . This reality was noted by playwright Oscar Wilde , who said : " One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of [*Illusions Perdues* protagonist] Lucien de Rubempré It haunts me in my moments of pleasure . I remember it when I laugh " .

At the same time , the characters depict a particular range of social types : the noble soldier , the scoundrel , the proud workman , the fearless spy , the alluring mistress . That Balzac was able to balance the strength of the individual against the representation of the type is evidence of the author 's skill . One critic explained that " there is a center and a circumference to Balzac 's world " .

Balzac 's use of repeat characters , moving in and out of the *Comédie* 's books , strengthens the realist representation . " When the characters reappear " , notes Rogers , " they do not step out of nowhere ; they emerge from the privacy of their own lives which , for an interval , we have not been allowed to see " . He also used a realist technique which French novelist Marcel Proust later termed " retrospective illumination " , whereby a character 's past is revealed long after she or he first appears .

A nearly infinite reserve of energy propels the characters in Balzac 's novels . Struggling against the currents of human nature and society , they may lose more often than they win ? but only rarely do they give up . This universal trait is a reflection of Balzac 's own social wrangling , that of his family , and an interest in the Austrian mystic and physician Franz Mesmer , who pioneered the study of animal magnetism . Balzac spoke often of a " nervous and fluid force " between individuals , and Raphaël de Valentin 's decline in *La Peau de Chagrin* exemplifies the danger of withdrawing from other people 's company .

= = = = Place = = = =

Representations of the city , countryside , and building interiors are essential to Balzac 's realism , often serving to paint a naturalistic backdrop before which the characters ' lives follow a particular course ; this gave him a reputation as an early naturalist . Intricate details about locations sometimes stretch for fifteen or twenty pages . As he did with the people around him , Balzac studied these places in depth , traveling to remote locations and comparing notes that he had made on previous visits .

The influence of Paris permeates *La Comédie* : nature defers to the artificial metropolis , in contrast to descriptions of the weather and wildlife in the countryside . " If in Paris " , Rogers says , " we are in a man @-@ made region where even the seasons are forgotten , these provincial towns are nearly always pictured in their natural setting " . Balzac said , " the streets of Paris possess human qualities and we cannot shake off the impressions they make upon our minds . " His labyrinthine city provided a literary model used later by English novelist Charles Dickens and Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky . The centrality of Paris in *La Comédie Humaine* is key to Balzac 's legacy as a realist . " Realism is nothing if not urban " , notes critic Peter Brooks ; the scene of a young man coming into the city to find his fortune is ubiquitous in the realist novel , and appears repeatedly in Balzac 's works , such as *Illusions Perdues* .

= = = = Perspective = = = =

Balzac 's literary mood evolved over time from one of despondency and chagrin to that of solidarity and courage ? but not optimism . *La Peau de Chagrin* , among his earliest novels , is a pessimistic

tale of confusion and destruction . But the cynicism declined as his oeuvre developed , and the characters of *Illusions Perdues* reveal sympathy for those who are pushed to one side by society . As part of the 19th @-@ century evolution of the novel as a " democratic literary form " , Balzac wrote that " les livres sont faits pour tout le monde " (" books are written for everybody ") .

Balzac concerned himself overwhelmingly with the darker essence of human nature and the corrupting influence of middle and high societies . His mission was to observe humankind in its most representative state , frequently wandering through the streets incognito among the masses of Parisian society to undertake his research . He used incidents from his life and the people around him , in works like *Eugénie Grandet* and *Louis Lambert* .

= = = Politics = = =

Balzac was a legitimist ; in many ways , his views are the antithesis of Victor Hugo 's democratic republicanism . Nevertheless , his keen insight regarding working @-@ class conditions earned him the esteem of many Socialists and Marxists . Engels declared that Balzac was his favorite writer . Marx 's work *Das Kapital* also makes constant reference to the works of Balzac and urged Engels to read Balzac 's work *The Unknown Masterpiece* .

= = Legacy = =

Balzac influenced writers of his time and beyond . He has been compared to Charles Dickens and is considered one of Dickens ' significant influences . Literary critic W. H. Helm calls one " the French Dickens " and the other " the English Balzac " , while another critic , Richard Lehan , states that " Balzac was the bridge between the comic realism of Dickens and the naturalism of Zola " .

Gustave Flaubert was also substantially influenced by Balzac . Praising his portrayal of society while attacking his prose style , Flaubert once wrote : " What a man he would have been had he known how to write ! " While he disdained the label of " realist " , Flaubert clearly took heed of Balzac 's close attention to detail and unvarnished depictions of bourgeois life . This influence shows in Flaubert 's work *L 'éducation sentimentale* which owes a debt to Balzac 's *Illusions Perdues* . " What Balzac started " , observes Lehan , " Flaubert helped finish " .

Marcel Proust similarly learned from the Realist example ; he adored Balzac and studied his works carefully , although he criticised what he perceived as Balzac 's " vulgarity " . Balzac 's story *Une Heure de ma Vie* (*An Hour of my Life* , 1822) , in which minute details are followed by deep personal reflections , is a clear forebear of the style which Proust used in *À la recherche du temps perdu* . However , Proust wrote later in life that the contemporary fashion of ranking Balzac higher than Tolstoy was " madness . "

Perhaps the author most affected by Balzac was American expatriate novelist Henry James . In 1878 James wrote with sadness about the lack of contemporary attention paid to Balzac , and lavished praise on him in four essays (in 1875 , 1877 , 1902 , and 1913) . In 1878 James wrote : " Large as Balzac is , he is all of one piece and he hangs perfectly together " . He wrote with admiration of Balzac 's attempt to portray in writing " a beast with a hundred claws " . In his own novels James explored more of the psychological motives of the characters and less of the historical sweep exhibited by Balzac ? a conscious style preference ; he stated : " the artist of the *Comédie Humaine* is half smothered by the historian " . Still , both authors used the form of the realist novel to probe the machinations of society and the myriad motives of human behavior .

Balzac 's vision of a society in which class , money and personal ambition are the key players has been endorsed by critics of both left @-@ wing and right @-@ wing political persuasions . Marxist Friedrich Engels wrote : " I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professional historians , economists and statisticians put together " . Balzac has received high praise from critics as diverse as Walter Benjamin and Camille Paglia . He was also praised by James Baldwin , who said 1984 : " I ? m sure that my life in France would have been very different had I not met Balzac . [He taught me] the way that country and its society works . " In 1970 Roland Barthes published *S / Z* , a detailed analysis of Balzac 's story *Sarrasine* and a key work in structuralist literary criticism .

Balzac has also influenced popular culture . Many of his works have been made into popular films and television serials , including : Travers Vale 's Père Goriot (1915) , Les Chouans (1947) , Le Père Goriot (1968 BBC mini @-@ series) , and La Cousine Bette (1974 BBC mini @-@ series , starring Margaret Tyzack and Helen Mirren ; 1998 film , starring Jessica Lange) . He is included in François Truffaut 's 1959 film , The 400 Blows . Truffaut believed Balzac and Proust to be the greatest French writers .

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