

***Il était une fois: Mapping Balzac's Paris***  
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French novelist Honoré de Balzac wrote a compilation of literary works entitled *The Human Comedy*, using realism and ethically ambivalent characters to depict the complexities and capricious state of the Parisian society during the Bourbon Restoration period of 1814-1830. Balzac's characters often shared a romantic notion of the capital and yearned to join high society, the ultimate signifier of becoming Parisian. Assimilation into Paris proved arduous for many and required cognitive observation of the city to discern its arbitrary rules. Within this mindset, to be part of the elite, one must permeate the city in order to understand and manipulate his surroundings, enabling him to relocate from impoverished to exuberant quarters to conform to aristocratic norms and flaunt newly obtained statuses.

Mapping Balzac's Paris offers another perspective of Balzac and his novels' themes by adding a spatial and visual context. This spatial element actualizes the allegories featuring the distinct unique qualities specific to 19th century Paris that are not readily seen simply by text. By visualizing Balzac's characters place in space, themes paralleling the storyline and character development emerge. The predominant theme throughout his novels is in the manner in which he meticulously exposes a society in flux, simplified by the modern rites of passage of Paris and coming-of-age characters revealed by physical movements through the city (Ginsburg, 2000). The purpose of this project is to visualize key elements of Balzac's Paris to assist students with understanding this period beyond what they might grasp through text analysis alone. Through graphic communication, the project gives an example of how mapping can prove useful when learning about literature and culture.

The project map creates a diagrammatic environment for undergraduate students of French pursuing to enrich their knowledge of 19th-century French literature and Parisian culture accented by Balzac. Resolving complicated concepts and illuminating unfamiliar locations of Paris is an advantage the map grants. It is an efficient pedagogical method for addressing topics in French literary and historical developments because the map reflects the rise to the modern city through the eyes of Eugène Rastignac in *Father Goriot*, Lucien de Rebempré in *Lost Illusions: A Distinguished Provincial at Paris*, and Raphaël de Valentin in *The Magic Skin*, as the characters struggle with shifting paradigms and ideologies in an evolving Paris.

## **Presence of Paris**

The Bourbon Restoration, a post-Revolutionary government, deviated from the old standards of the absolute monarchy of the Ancien Régime introducing a new social structure (Ginsburg, 2000). A new political system signified one of the many transitions Paris faced that ranged from the industrial revolution, urbanization, advances in capitalism, and social shifts to mass culture (Raser, 1970). Life in France transformed because these transitions generated the freedom for upward, downward, as well as lateral mobility between social classes, which disrupted the inflexible hierarchies that previously kept classes fixed (Ginsburg, 2000). Interclass access allowed new opportunities for individuals of any position, such as those of the *Parvenu*, newly monied elite lacking aristocratic connections, like Pauline in *The Magic Skin*, and those of ambiguous origins to achieve status in high society (Ginsburg, 2000).

A term exemplifying the transitory nature at the time is the *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, a French term for *ambler*, symbolized 19<sup>th</sup> Century Parisian culture of strolling idly up and down the grand boulevards (Benjamin, 2013). Key traits of the *flâneur* include a peripheral figure of a crowd, in a transitory state, and an observer of space (e.g. street names) (Buse, 2005). As Beaudelaire illustrated in the *Les Fleurs du Mal*, “The *flâneur* still stood at the margins, of the great city as of the bourgeois class. Neither of them have yet overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home” (Benjamin, 2013). The boulevard life tied to the *flâneur* being lost in thought and in trance by the raucous sites and sounds yet still attentive to his surroundings (Raser, 1970). The *flâneur* motif accentuates the importance of heedfulness to one’s background and personifies the transitions of Paris as the main characters adapt to a modernizing Paris (Reiger, 2010).

Being an observer puts the *flâneur* at an advantage for conquering the Paris labyrinth (Birkerts, 2015). The cultural capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dominates and consumes its inhabitants. The character movements indicate that there exists a set of constraints to be followed especially in order to ascend into the richer neighborhoods of the city. To be initiated into Paris, one must learn and understand its facets.

“...Being Parisian is defined not only by one’s physical location in the city but also by a reflexive process in which knowledge of Paris confirms one’s membership in it” (Ginsburg, 2000). To learn the ways of Paris and earn the acceptance of the city, one must negotiate through the strata of the culture, be mobile, and acute to the subtle nuances of the different neighborhoods particularly on the Paris boulevards (Raser, 1970).

The French social life consisted of passing time on the boulevards (Raser, 1970). It was a public forum, consequently a method to promote appearances and to observe others as was by frequenting theatres, cafés, and the Palais-Royal for entertainment (Raser, 1970). These rare communal areas were unique because they intermixed all classes, allowing social space to be shared (Raser, 1970). As Balzac expressed, “Le comptoire d’un café est le parlement du peuple.” “The counter of a coffeehouse is the parliament of the people,” meaning everyone despite their status has the right to attend and speak in these social spaces (Buse, 2005).

Realism promotes the accurate representation of a person, thing, or situation (Weinberg, 1937). It acted as a tool for reflecting city affairs and documenting historical moments that emphasized political and social movements that shaped what is means to be “Parisian” (Weinberg, 1937). Realism paralleled empiricism and functioned as a transitional device in 19<sup>th</sup> century novels (Ermarth, 2015). It drew a scene, summary or background (Ermarth, 2015).

### **Topics in Parisian Culture: the Balzac Perspective**

Realism served as Balzac’s main writing style throughout his novels where he provided minute details to allude reality and give a sense of living in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris (Weinberg, 1937). “Balzac’s descriptions do more than reconstruct a static place or set of characters; they reconstruct the dynamic, ongoing processes by which the spatial structure of society reproduces itself” (Ginsburg, 2000). These comprehensive descriptions guide the reader through a vivid portrayal of the characters decorum, atmosphere, and social conditions by contrasting scenery of varying social classes and the neighborhoods,

such as contrasting a luxurious mansion versus the physical decay of the poor residences (Ginsburg, 2000). To illustrate, Madame Beauséant's mansion is portrayed as a magical place. "He has been dazzled by the marvelous, rich glitter of the house; it was like being in the *Arabian Nights*" (Balzac, 1962). In contrast, Raphaël de Valentin's dwelling is described as "The roofing fell in a steep slope, and the sky was visible through chinks in the tiles" (Balzac, 1977). These comparisons invoke social relationships and norms of Paris.

Effects of the modernization of Paris influence the quotidian life of Balzac's characters. For example, the developing personages express their naïveté by experiencing the contrasting lifestyles of provincial against urban cadences as well as wealthy against pauperized standards. Characters passing between the disparate neighborhoods highlight the distinctions between the classes and the customs of the people inhabiting them.

During the course of his first aimless walk across the boulevards and along the Rue de la Paix, Lucien, like all newcomers, was much more interested in things than in people. In Paris the scale of everything is the first thing that strikes one; the luxury of the shops, the height of the houses, the affluence of the carriages, the contrast, everywhere seen, between great wealth and extreme poverty.

Astonished at that crowd, at which he himself was a stranger, that man of inspiration felt himself immensely diminished. People who have a measure of local celebrity in a provincial town, and who at every step encounter some proof of their own importance; can never reconcile themselves to this sudden and total extinction of the basis of their self-esteem (Balzac, 2001).

Balzac applies the use of proper names of Parisian attractions and streets to draw the context of the experience of the flâneur. "Street names link to language, the city, and provide a medium for particularly significant experiences," often reflecting the political transitions and movements of the city

(Reiger, 2010). For instance, “saints” were added to street names after the French revolution, such as Saint-Honoré, Saint-Antoine, and Saint-Roch (Reiger, 2010). By referencing street names and other sites, it creates an urban context, acts as a vehicle for his characters valuable experiences with their surroundings, and engages character mobility (Reiger, 2010).

Maneuverability within Paris is vital for success and prominence. “And in Paris success is everything, it’s the key to power” (Balzac, 1962). Mimicking the flâneur, much is to be learned walking through the city because it allows comprehension of social distinctions and relationships between the classes, especially since the “topography of urban space is an excellent source of information” (Ginsburg, 2000). Balzac’s protagonists struggle financially and tend to move about the city as pedestrians. Possibilities through interacting with their environment enable them to discover the etiquettes of the classes within these spaces. “[One] must first become a kind of ‘foot-soldier’ and observer of Paris in order to master the art of seduction and urban knowledge” (Ginsburg, 2000).

The characters exhibit flâneurie because they are transient characters. They are newly acquainted with Paris, recently arriving from the provinces. They yearn for success and status in this cutthroat city, yet they remain trapped in the poor Latin Quarter on the left Bank of the Seine. Emulating the ambiguous figures, they observe the desired aristocratic and parvenu social circles from the outside and, due to their mediocre identity, lack permanence and presence on the Parisian scene. One requires a high social standing and rich finances to thrive in Paris. The quickest way to achieve it is to penetrate Paris’ high society.

With newfound knowledge of society, after navigating the city and observing the boulevards, the characters use the capital as a source to gain power by exploiting and manipulating those they studied. Characters throughout Balzac’s novels descend or ascend social ranks if they pass initiation into Paris. Personages who applied mobility progressed towards their goals (Ginsburg, 2000). For instance, Lucien de Rubempré from *Lost Illusions: A Distinguished Provincial at Paris* ventured from the Latin Quarter

and attached himself to an ambitious actress and courtesan named Coralie. She introduced Lucien to a broad social circle and provided new lodgings and life on the Right Bank.

### **Mapping & Results**

“Will it be understood outside Paris? It is doubtful. Its setting, its atmosphere, its local color and detail; can be appreciated only between the hill of Montmartre and the heights of Montrouge” (Balzac, 1962). Balzac questions whether one can understand his dramas without actualizing Paris, which proves the importance of mapping qualitative data. Mapping the whereabouts of Balzac’s characters offers instructors, students, and other audience members a tangible experience. The map acts as an aid through the complex novels by familiarizing the user with the Parisian layout, illuminating the severity of physical distances between faubourgs and elucidating social relations (Ginsburg, 2000). The map unmasks symbolic patterns that would remain undetected and abstract concepts that would be misinterpreted without the form of visual communication.

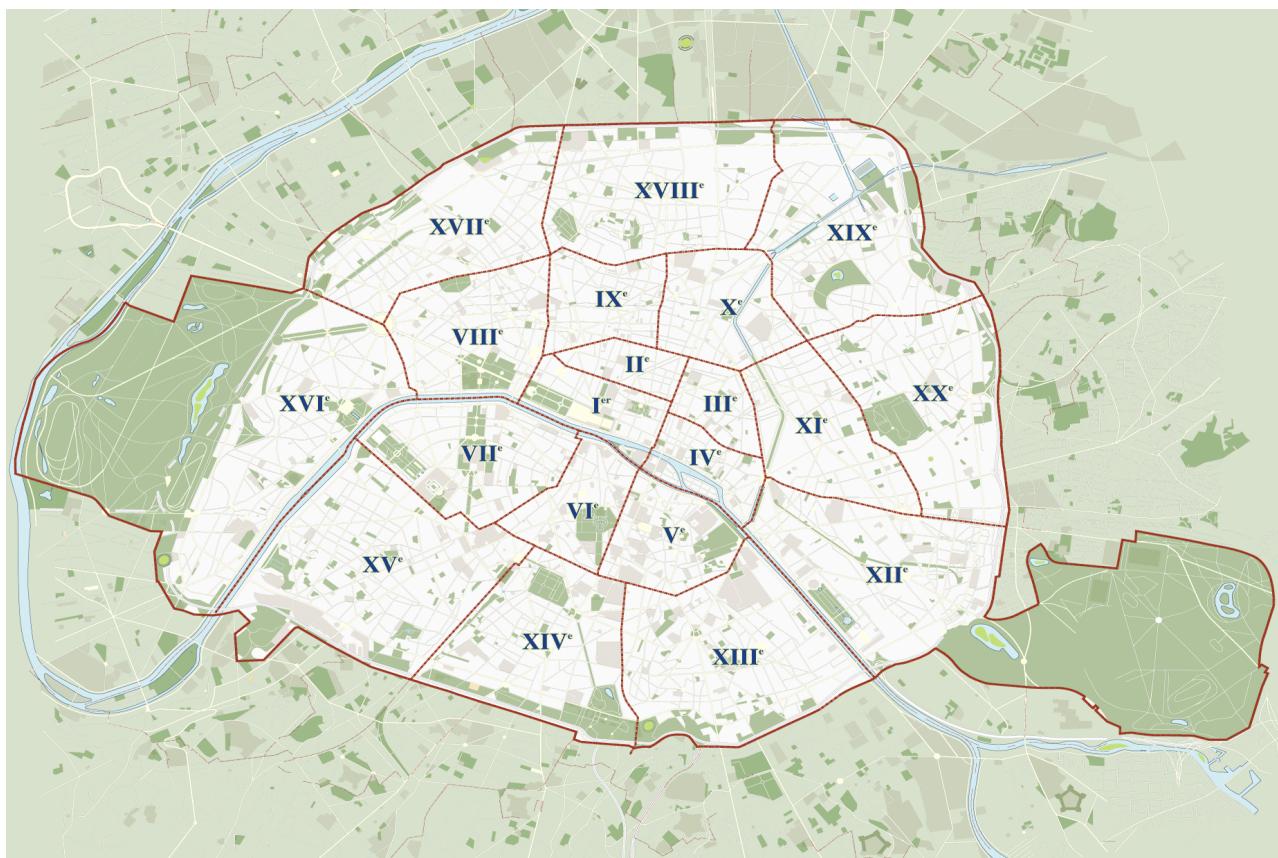
The portrayal of Paris through mapping helps to orient those unfamiliar to the city. It aims to introduce the geography of the distinct faubourgs, quarters, and cultural sites. More importantly, the map provides a detailed road network of the time, displaying the grand boulevards as well as the “petite” streets that are not commonly known and revealing obsolete street names referenced by Balzac. The map can also be used as a reference to better understand the text.

Mapping the city space presents the full extent of Paris through its urban design. There is a correlation between physical distance and social distance revealed through the apparent chasm between conflicting neighborhoods (Ginsburg, 2000). For example, competing neighborhoods such as the aristocratic quarter of Saint-Germain (i.e. Quarter VII) lies on the Left Bank while the up-and-coming Chaussée d’Antin quarter (i.e. Quarter IX) rested on the outlying Right Bank separated by the Seine. The distance increases drastically between affluent and poor areas typically located on opposing sides of the city as seen by the impoverished Latin Quarter (i.e. Quarter V) against wealthy neighborhoods on the

Right Bank as Faubourg Saint-Honoré (i.e. Quarter VIII) and Chaussée d'Antin, as seen in Figure 1.  
(Raser, 1970).

I returned on foot from the Faubourg Saint-Honoré where Fœdora lived. Almost the entire length of Paris stretches between her mansion and the Rue des Cordiers; even though it was a raw night, it seemed a short way to me. What a crazy idea! To set out to conquer Fœdora, in winter—a hard one—when my worldly possessions amounted to less than thirty francs, when the distance was so great! (Balzac, 1977).

**Figure 1: Map of Paris' Quarters**



Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d7/Paris\\_plan\\_jms.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d7/Paris_plan_jms.png)

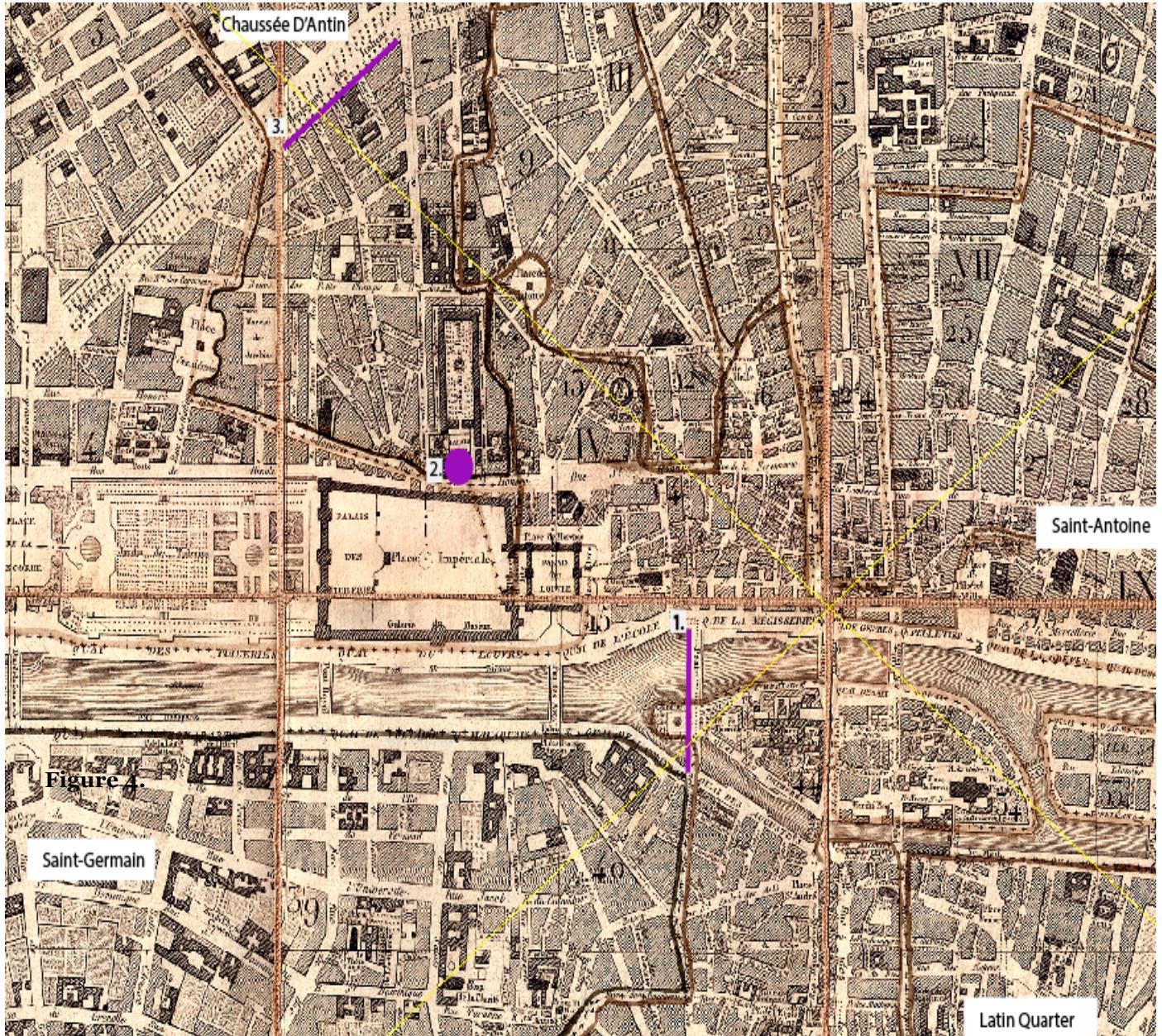
Typical movements within the Bildungsromans convey that vertical movements demonstrate social segregation (Ginsburg, 2000). This can be seen by the comments of Madame Beauséant, an aristocratic connection to Eugène de Rastignac in *Father Goriot*, suggesting her distaste for the Parvenu class. “Now, Madame de Nucingen would like the dirt all the way from the Rue Saint-Lazare (Quarter Chaussée d’Antin) to the Rue de Grenelle (Quarter Saint-Germain), to be allowed into my drawing room” (Balzac, 1962). On the contrary, horizontal movements indicate differences in class (Ginsburg, 2000). The intersection of this social segregation exemplifies old and new Paris expanding and how one class perceives the other (Ginsburg, 2000).

Understanding the 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian geography of the social classes through cartography clarifies the expansion of the city. As Paris developed, richer classes attempted to isolate the working and poorer classes of neighborhoods such as the Latin Quarter (i.e. Quarter V) and Sainte-Antoine (i.e. Quarter XI), by adding more space between them. For instance, the trendy areas shifted further northwest from the center of the city and the poorer classes (Raser, 1970). It began at the Pont Neuf (i.e. 1) during the 1600s, to the Palais-Royal (i.e. 2), to popular Boulevards situated even further on the Right Bank, such as the Boulevard-du-Temple and the Boulevard des Italiens (i.e. 3) during the 1800s, as seen in Figure 2 (Raser, 1970).

There is a connection between how the major and minor characters correspond to the topography of the city. Balzac’s novels compare the characters that are geographically fixed to those who are mobile (Ginsburg, 2000). The main characters begin in garrets and only advance through the social hierarchy when they depart their neighborhoods and explore the city and social classes. Mapping the figures indicates the scope of their movement, which is essential to their success. In Balzac’s novels spatial distance represents social differentiation. It invokes the model of the map to show that spatial mobility, not spatial segregation, is the means to social mastery in post revolutionary France (Ginsburg, 2000). In comparison, the minor characters in *Father Goriot*, such as Monsieur Poiret, seldom left the boarding house in the Latin Quarter. When he ventured out, he resided in close vicinity within the same

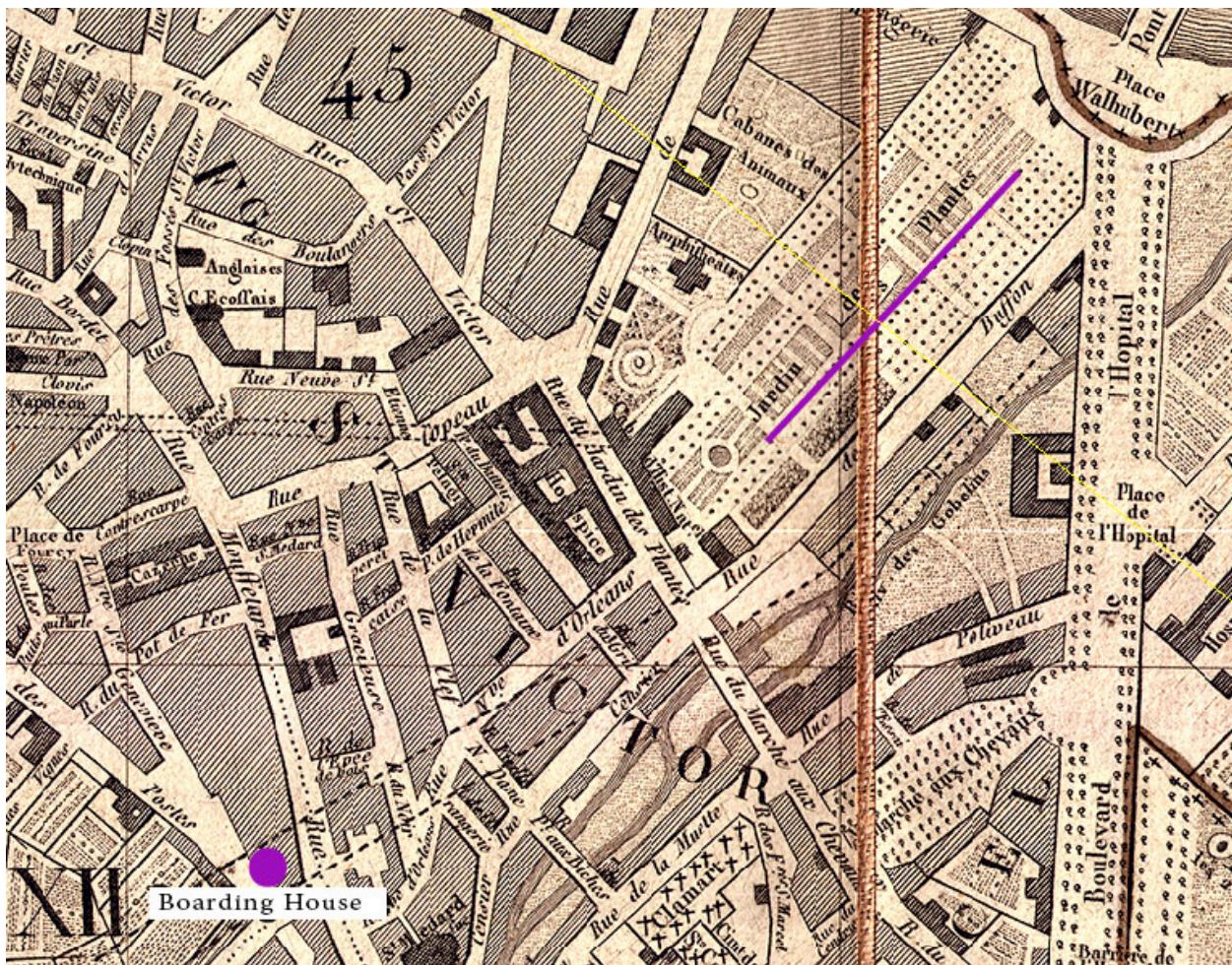
neighborhood to the Jardin des Plantes, as presented in Figure 3. Therefore, the stationary characters remain socially static.

**Figure 2: Shifting of Popular Areas**



Source: Bonnisel, J. *Plan de la ville et faubourgs de Paris: avec ses Monuments*

**Figure 3: Monsieur Poiret, Immobile Character**

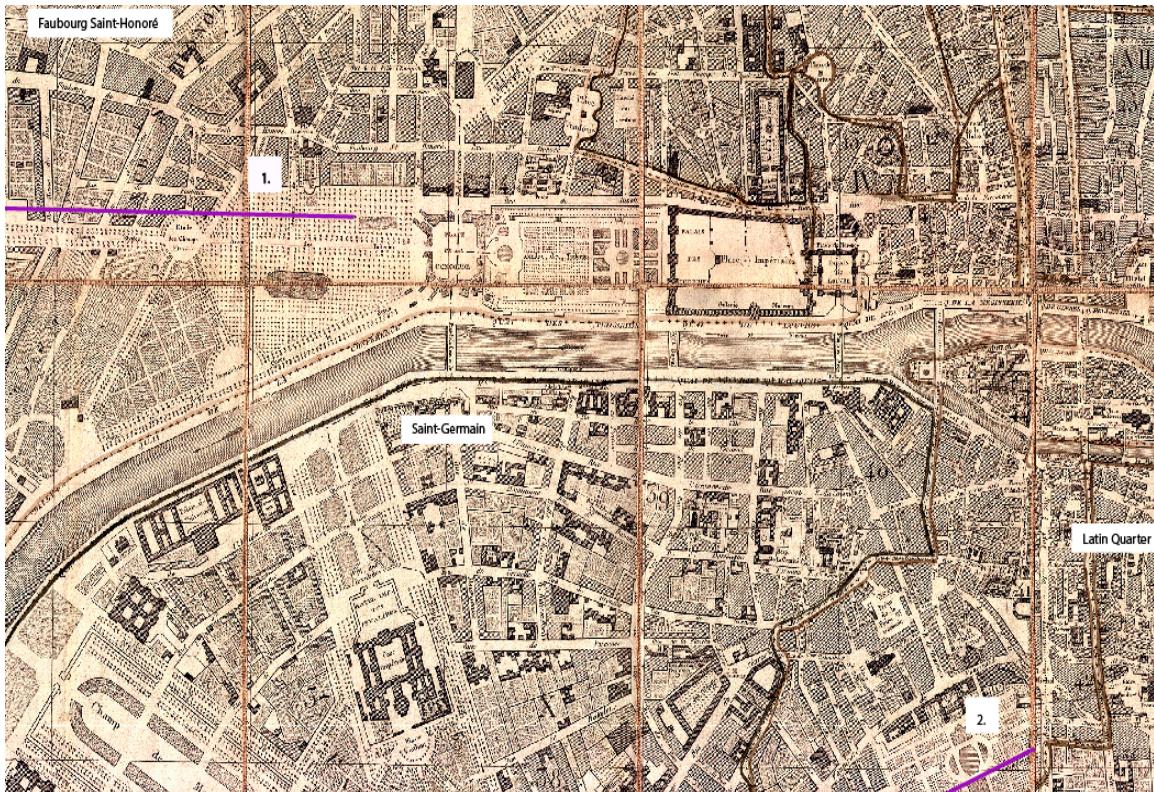


Source: Bonnissel, J. *Plan de la ville et faubourgs de Paris: avec ses Monuments*

The repetitive selection of places denoted in Balzac's realism is a cue to social patterns of urban space. Certain places had symbolic and historical meanings that explain why the novel associates them with specific characters, classes, and neighborhoods (Ginsburg, 2000). For example, the affluent recreated in the Bois de Boulogne or the Champs-Élysées (i.e. 2) while their counterparts passed time in the Jardin du Luxembourg (i.e. 1) positioned in close proximity to their quarters, as seen in Figure 4. Other themes appear through Mapping Balzac's Paris as seen through his use of recurring locations. To

illustrate, male gaze is perpetual with his characters desiring unattainable noblewomen, which materializes as the individuals court their glorified idols at fashionable cultural centers (e.g. Comédie-Italienne). The chosen locations represent how specific areas relate to the tendencies of social class and their topography in Paris.

**Figure 4: Site Location Tendencies of Social Classes**



Source: Bonnisel, J. *Plan de la ville et faubourgs de Paris: avec ses Monuments*

## Methods

The actual process of mapping out Balzac's characters would not have been possible without the dominant art form of the time: realism. Because Balzac creates a vividly detailed portrait of Paris with accurate depictions of Paris streets and locations, it was possible to create points for the characters experiences, allowing for detailed visualization of their movements. To begin the data acquisition

process, I first created a French word list containing words associated with place. I focused on words referring to the city structures (e.g. road, plaza, neighborhood, downtown). Then I accumulated words that denote places of the city (e.g. cabaret, house, library), Paris attraction sites (e.g. Parthenon, Opera, Pont Neuf), physical features (e.g. river, valley, mountain), and any variation of those names, including archaic and slang forms. It was important to encompass numerous genres to increase potential matches for geographic locations and found that my intrinsic knowledge of the French language and experience in Paris supported this process.

Afterwards, I proceeded with a semi-automated data extraction process to increase efficiency for time constraints. I applied a combination of *Taporware* (<http://taporware.ualberta.ca/>) and *Voyant Tools* (<http://voyant-tools.org/>), web-based text analysis programs, to extract locations throughout the novels. These programs matched place names from the extracted list of French words to a digital copy of a French plain text version of the novel retrieved from the French National Library (Bibliothèque Nationale de France). I also manually reviewed the novels to confirm the accuracy of the automated process. Once geographical sites matched, I detected the locations mentioned in the novels in addition to points visited by main characters throughout the storyline. The place names were then geocoded, first using scripting and followed by manual cleanup to increase accuracy for generic place names.

Choosing an appropriate basemap was another critical step in developing a realistic representation of the character's environment. It was necessary to embody the novels' setting because Paris faced dramatic changes in urban design commencing within Balzac's era. Therefore, I searched for a Paris city map that was at the beginning of the novels' aforementioned time span to represent conditions encountered by the characters before the election of Baron Haussmann, who radically redesigned Paris. Moreover, the map needed to clearly display streets and main attractions with enough detail and resolution to have functionality for the web. In the end, a city map of Paris from

1814, *Plan de la ville et faubourgs de Paris: avec ses Monuments*, J. Bonnisel, acquired from the John R. Borchert Map Library at the University of Minnesota, was selected, meeting all requirements.

Several platforms aided the web map creation including ArcMap 10.2, Adobe software, as well as the ESRI Leaflet API, and assisted in illustrating the characters' evolution amidst the narrative.

First, I georeferenced the digital copy of the *Plan de la Ville* in ArcMap 10.2 using ESRI satellite basemaps and coordinates of Parisian tourist attractions as guides. I proceeded to build the character feature layers, all of which are hosted on an ArcGIS server to be coupled with the ESRI Leaflet API, building the interactive web map components.

The cartographic design process was a delicate task. To represent social dimensions, imitate the character movements, and juxtapose modern and 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris was poetic. The character data points alone could not express their full relationship to Paris. Therefore, I added the layers for Parisian attractions to exhibit what monuments and cultural features existed at this time. In addition, I digitized the Paris attractions to create a cultural blueprint of the city. I featured the faubourg boundaries and descriptions to highlight distinctions for a comprehensive user experience. Furthermore, I included a timescale to animate the movements of the characters, which brings the characters to life.

In conclusion, this project sparked my interest with my background in French and my appreciation of synthesizing disparate sources such as humanities with GIS. Mapping literature, like the works of Balzac, plays a critical role in text comprehension by adding a visual context. Readers, instructors, and students alike will deduce to a further degree the undertones, circumstances, and narrative through the physical geography. Through mapping Balzac's Paris, themes concerning political, social, and cultural movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris emerge and assist students of French because the patterns and actions mirroring these themes are easily discernable through the character movements. The map itself conjures a reality and promotes an interactive experience. Visualizing

qualitative data through mapping, is an essential communication element to the learning environment in the humanities going forward.

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