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“Money is life”

Given Honoré de Balzac’s focus on money, he probably would have made a great accountant at Ernst & Young had he not become an author. Throughout his novel, *Père Goriot*, Balzac constantly references the exact cost of items ranging from boarding in a house to the sums needed for clothing and ultimately to the high price of death. Balzac associates having money to one’s ability to enter society. Balzac’s personal history likely influenced his writing. After all, Balzac almost went bankrupt and had to be bailed out by his mother and friends to the tune of approximately 40,000 francs (Pritchett 79). For a man who liked to live lavishly, money played a big role in Balzac’s life and it plays a prominent role in the novel. In *Père Goriot*, Balzac’s preoccupation with money is, perhaps, best summed up by Goriot’s statement: “Money is life” (210).

In the opening of *Père Goriot*, Balzac focuses on the finances of the boarding house by denoting specific costs associated with living at the Maison Vauquer and shows that even in the dilapidated boarding house there is still a stratification of people based on money. Money is the definition of life and how you are treated in *Père Goriot*. Boarders’ rooms, and location, were based on one’s ability to pay. Thus, the more expensive rooms, such as those of Madame Couture and Victorine Taillefer, were on the lower floors and these boarders “paid eighteen hundred francs board and lodging” (7). Conversely, the cheapest rooms were on the less desirable higher floors and cost “forty-five francs a month for board and lodging” (7). The social hierarchy of Madame Vauquer’s residents was based on their monthly rent. In addition to

money's effect on rooming, money also affected the way Madame Vauquer treated her boarders: "These seven boarders were Madame Vauquer's spoilt children and the attention and respect she accorded them was calculated with the accuracy of an astronomer according to the amount they paid for their board" (8). The true importance of money in one's life can be seen through the difference in treatment that one receives. Similarly, Madame Vauquer initially had a romantic interest in Goriot when she believed he was a man of wealth. She had seen in the Register of Government Stock that Goriot had an income of some eight to ten thousand francs a year (16). Armed with this information, Madame Vauquer began visualizing getting married, selling her boarding house and becoming "a lady of note in the quarter" (17). However, Madame Vauquer loses interest when it is apparent he is not as wealthy as she believed; Goriot moves to a cheaper apartment and Madame Vauquer simply refers to him as Père Goriot and no longer with the respect of "Monsieur" Goriot (22).

Balzac uses specific amounts of money to describe what it takes to enter the upper echelons of Parisian society. Clothing is an extremely important part of entering high society: Balzac writes that a tailor is the "link between young men's present and future" (87). A tailor can be quite expensive, costing "Fifteen hundred francs" (87), yet the expensive cost of clothing is only a small element of what one needs to enter high society. Vautrin lists the exact expenses of the upper echelons of Parisian society:

If you want to cut a figure in Paris, you must have three horses and a tilbury for the daytime, and a brougham for the evening; making a total of nine thousand francs for your carriages. You would be unworthy of your destiny if you did not spend three thousand francs at your tailor's, six hundred at the perfumer's, three hundred at the bootmaker's

and three hundred at the hatter's. As for your laundress, she'll cost you a thousand. . . .

That comes to fourteen thousand. . . . Add to these basic necessities six thousand francs for rations, a thousand for a billet. So, my boy, we need to raise a cool twenty-five thousand a year to meet expenses, or we land in the gutter. . . . (139-140).

Rather than just saying that you need a lot of money to enter high society, Balzac gives the exact figures to show just how much it really takes. Vautrin's speech to Eugene emphasizes that without money and the trappings of success, there is no way to be accepted into high society. Balzac himself spent lavishly on clothes in his own effort to be a fixture in society; in fact, one receipt shows he had purchased 58 pairs of gloves (Pritchett 82). In addition to the literal necessity of money, Balzac also associates money with confidence: "The moment money slips into a student's pocket, an imaginary pillar rises within him to give him support. He walks more briskly than before, he feels that he has a firm case from which to exert pressure, he looks people full and straight in the eye, he moves more nimbly" (88). The confidence money gives one is an important aspect of one's entrance into high Parisian society.

Even when Goriot is on his deathbed, it is money that controls the ultimate send off he can have, as if even in death, money is what matters. While on his deathbed, all Goriot can think about is money. He is upset because he didn't have enough money to buy his daughter a dress: "I felt so humiliated at not having the twelve thousand francs yesterday that I would have given the rest of my miserable life to make up for the failure" (229). In the midst of dying, Goriot also thinks about how he "pledged a year's annuity to Papa Gobseck in return for four hundred francs cash down" (229). On his deathbed, all Goriot can seem to think about is money. Even when you are dying, you cannot escape the overbearing presence of money. In addition to Goriot thinking

about money while on his deathbed, money plays a role in his funeral. Even a funeral in Paris is expensive. With very limited funds for the funeral, “There were not even black hangings at the door. It was a pauper’s funeral, without ceremony, mourners, friends or family” (261). With the little money they had, Bianchon had to purchase a discounted coffin. In addition, the priests gave limited prayers since they that’s all that could be paid for: “The two priests, the server and the verger came in and gave their seventy francs’ worth, this at a time when the church is not rich enough to offer prayers without payment” (262). When it was time to tip the gravediggers, Eugene didn’t have any money left so he had to borrow money from Christophe - a servant. It is as if money is all that is on everyone’s mind even when it is the death and loss that should be of primary concern.

Throughout *Père Goriot*, Balzac shows the importance of money and how it defines everything from the ability to rent a room to having a proper funeral. But, Balzac goes deeper by citing the specific amount for each element of society whether it be the room location in a boarding house or the cost of a tailor. Balzac seems to suggest that one’s self worth is dependent on one’s monetary value. Even today, Balzac’s message holds true and money does buy acceptance into certain aspects of society. In *Père Goriot*, the message is the very one that Goriot states, namely that “money is life” (210).

Works Cited

Pritchett, V. S. *Balzac*. Knopf, 1973.