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Honoré de Balzac's portrayal of the feminine condition in *The Wild Ass's Skin*, *Père Goriot*, and *The Lily of the Valley*

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**Honoré de Balzac's portrayal of the feminine condition in *The Wild Ass's Skin*,
Père Goriot, and *The Lily of the Valley***

By

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English

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Introduction

In nineteenth century France, women appeared to be second class citizens. They were often limited in their abilities to have independence and secure their own wealth. As Mary Ann Mason Burki says, “in the nineteenth century, a married woman had almost no legal rights to her own property or to her wages if she worked”.¹ This perception of women perhaps justifies why, as Honoré de Balzac’s novels illustrated the realities of French society, he attempted to characterize women’s struggles to obtain control and power in their lives. In his novels *The Wild Ass’s Skin* (1831), *The Lily of the Valley* (1835), and *Père Goriot* (1835), Balzac sought to prove how women could improve their lot.

Firstly, in studying how women had been relegated to second-class citizens under their father’s leadership, this thesis endeavors to show how women’s status was inferior to that of men. Secondly, the paper will study how the novels sought to portray the women's ability to secure mobility when faced with such inferior status. Finally, examining how women built and controlled their Salons, this report will look at the place of the women’s Salons as a way to develop and perfect their image.

¹ Burki, Mary Ann Mason, “Women in the Nineteenth Century as Seen through History and Literature”, *JSTOR* (California: San Francisco State University, 1975), 197

Second Class Citizens

Women and men possessed different roles in nineteenth century France, for women lived “under the threat of arranged and dissoluble marriages, disinheritance through the rule of primogeniture, and forced relegation to the convent”.² The women were often perceived as the weaker sex, and they were first under the guardianship of their father and were later controlled by their husband through marriage. With limited control to gain independence in their lives, women appeared reliant on men to provide them with security.

Beginning with education, women were often denied the opportunity to be involved in academia, whereas men would be encouraged. Without the ability to develop a perspective outside their father’s control, they remained subordinate and agreeable to him. For example, in *Lily of the Valley*, the children, Jacques and Madeleine, had their expectations set for them. As Henriette explained to Felix, her children’s tutor:

Jacques will be, like you, a man of the highest education, possessed of the worthiest knowledge; he will be, like you, an honor to his country, which he may assist in governing, helped by you, whose standing will be so high; but I will strive to make him faithful to his first affections. Madeleine, dear creature, has a noble heart; she is pure as the snows on the highest Alps; she will have a woman’s devotion and a woman’s graceful intellect.³

Indeed, it was presumed that, the son, Jacques would become a scholar, but as for Madeleine, she would be devoted to developing more feminine skills such as sewing or cooking. Essentially, she would be marriageable, respectful, and refined like her mother, Henriette. Just like Henriette was denied an academic education, it was presumed that Madeleine would also follow the same path as her mother.

² Rose, R.B, “Feminism, Women and the French Revolution”, *JSTOR* (Berghahn Books, 1995), 9

³ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Lily of the Valley* (Middletown: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 116

Because women lacked the means to argue their fate, they ultimately accepted their father's plans. Women were expected to be feminine and graceful and were not provided an education that would give them the power to argue their position in society. They were instead provided "a system of education for women which shielded them from serious intellectual challenges".⁴ It seems that nineteenth century French society was still afraid that if women were too educated, they would engage in progressive thought and fight for their own independence.

Education for women in nineteenth century France was far different from education for men, and Pauline's education in *The Wild Ass's Skin* is an example of this difference. After her family suffered poverty, her mother's main concern was to ensure that Pauline could still receive an education, despite all their misfortune. In an act of generosity, Raphael de Valentin, a family friend, agreed to become Pauline's instructor. However, Pauline still received a traditional female education, for she learned to play the piano. Eager to learn, Pauline "was such a quick learner that she soon became more adept than [Valentin] at playing the piano".⁵ Her enthusiasm to play was seen as a positive trait in her mother's eyes, a mother who was concerned about Pauline establishing a feminine grace. Although Valentin did not focus on arithmetic or science, as he would have for a boy, he was able to provide Pauline with instruction that would contribute to her femininity. Thus, this education given to Pauline respected the standards of education of the nineteenth century. Even poor people thought they had to follow such standards for their daughters to succeed in their feminine role in life.

⁴ Burki, Mary Ann Mason, 197-8

⁵ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Wild Ass's Skin* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 80

Furthermore, this lack of education helped to create instability in women, who then often appeared naive. This condition could result in cases of depression, anxiety, and miserliness even in the most resilient of women. As “women made up the majority of those diagnosed with these new ailments and represented the majority of those incarcerated in asylums”,⁶ women were frequently seen as melancholic, volatile, or even mentally unstable in general if they were to resist their housewifery duties or were involved in infidelity. For example, “those who openly expressed the desire for independence and sexual freedom were frowned upon”.⁷ Women had to be careful in their outward appearance, as they did not want to be diagnosed as insane. As a result, in the rare case that women acquired independence, they could develop defensive attitudes as a means to protect themselves. For example, in *The Wild Ass's Skin*, Raphael de Valentin fell in love with the recent independent widow, Foedora. Although on the outside, she looked like the perfect picture of a noble woman in her mannerisms and the way she dressed, as Valentin eloquently stated, “her soul was a desert”.⁸ After suffering under a controlling father and later a controlling husband, Foedora lost her softness to vanity, and became overly rational and calculating in her behavior. Society now had become like a game for Foedora, and her bachelors were merely her pawns. As he understood Foedora’s motives, Valentin rejected her and her cold demeanor. In a moment of introspection, he realized, “Foedora had infected me with the leprosy of her vanity. When I looked into my soul, I found it was gangrenous, rotten”.⁹ In fact, Foedora seemed to have exchanged one master for another: her father and then her husband for society.

⁶ Harsin, Jill, “Gender, Class, and Madness in Nineteenth-Century France”, *JSTOR* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1992), 1051

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1058

⁸ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, 111

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138

Indeed, to compensate for their lack of education and the instability resulting from it, women were under the control of their father. They followed their father's instructions and respected his authority. The fathers controlled their daughters' lives and could often choose how their daughters advanced into society. Such control is explained in *The Lily of the Valley*, where Henriette resigned herself to her father's choice of a husband in order to save her family from an impoverished lifestyle. As the narrator states, "instead of rejecting a marriage with a feeble and worn-out man of thirty-five, [Henriette] seemed satisfied to accept it".¹⁰ Under paternal watch, the fathers typically chose the man they wanted a daughter to wed, as choosing a husband of great discipline and wealth could help the families' security and fortune. It was not often that a woman could influence her own fate.

In rare circumstances, such as in *Père Goriot*, a father's obsessions with his daughters gave the girls more freedom to choose their husbands and improve their lives. After their mother had died, Goriot gave his unconditional love to his daughters and ultimately let them chase their own happiness. He did not place any restrictions on them. He had sacrificed his fortune equally for his daughters and "when his daughters came of marriageable age, they were in a position to pick husbands to suit their tastes".¹¹ Although this situation was *en-soi* rare, the girls, by choosing rich and influential men, seemed able to find initial happiness and flourish among the nobility.

However, the freedom given by Goriot to his daughters was not the norm. Especially for a man of financial wealth, finding a suitable husband for his daughter was a logical task, rather than an emotional one. The husband was to uphold and honor the father-in-law's family name,

¹⁰ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Lily of the Valley*, 34

¹¹ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc. 2009), 82

and through this marriage, the father would guarantee his family's legacy in society. That tradition of securing one's legacy can also be seen in *The Lily of the Valley*, where the Count intended to stabilize his family and his property. In managing the estate, the Count, Madeleine's father, had formulated a plan "without injury to Madeleine, for whom the Duc de Lenoncourt would no doubt assist in promoting a good marriage".¹² In an effort to maintain his own family wealth, the father traditionally chose the husband without much regard for the daughter's opinion.

In *The Wild Ass's Skin*, on the other hand, Foedora, who was married in the traditional way, was able to break the usual pattern. As a widow, she entertained men in her Salon, but did not take them seriously. It was to the point that Eugène de Rastignac, introducing Raphael de Valentin to the rich Foedora, warned him, "she was married or sold to some old man and the memory of her first marriage has made her dread love affairs".¹³ Thus, although she seemed to be in a better position, Foedora feared losing her newly acquired independence. The lack of control in her life, first demonstrated by her father and then secondly with her husband, was frustrating for the woman who wanted the freedom to make her own choices. The misery she had suffered under both men, is a better reflection of the women in nineteenth century France, as "marital status determined the social, economic, and legal condition of women in early modern times".¹⁴

¹² Balzac, Honoré de, *The Lily of the Valley*, 50

¹³ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, 90

¹⁴ Adams, Christine, "A Choice Not to Wed? Unmarried Women in Eighteenth-Century France", *JSTOR* (Maryland: Oxford University Press, 1996), 883.

Marriage

As women were largely dependent on the men in their lives, they relied on the success of their marriage. After a father gave his daughter away, the husband assumed control. Even in marriage, women could then be perceived as useful tools, more than as partners, for a successful life.

For men, it was appealing to secure a woman of higher status than their own. Especially toward the end of the nineteenth century, social mobility was becoming increasingly popular in France. Additionally,

the successful entry of the mobile bourgeois into a higher social class than that of his parents is his marriage with a member of this higher class. The significance of such a marriage is, presumably, that by virtue of his occupation, his wealth, and his style of life in general, the mobile bourgeois has become the social equal of his marriage partner.¹⁵

If a man could secure a marriage with a woman of nobility, his fortune would be ensured. Early in *Père Goriot*, the young Eugène de Rastignac, who was originally studying law, envisioned marriage as perhaps an easier way of achieving such security. Indeed, he

was soon diverted by the need to make social contracts, and noticing how influential women were in social life, he suddenly took it into his head to launch out into the world so that he could win some feminine patronage.¹⁶

By interacting with society women, Rastignac intended and succeed in elevated his status, and thus made himself well known in Parisian society.

In fact, the easiest way to secure a fortune as men, was to select women with considerable dowries. Provided by the father, the dowry acted as an asset in a daughter's marriage. Although the dowry never belonged to the daughter, it elevated her worth and assisted her husband. The

¹⁵ Barber, Elinor G, *The Bourgeoisie in 18th-Century France*, JSTOR (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1955

¹⁶ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 28

husband would be given the sum of money, with the intent of creating a comfortable life for the daughter, however it was ultimately up to the husband how he spent it. As Steve Harrel studied, “dowry is not simply a form of inheritance by females in a complex society concerned with lineal transmission of property. It is also a form of marriage payment”.¹⁷ Men ultimately had the power of the purse, and their wives’ dowries influenced their place in society and affected their fortunes. In the beginning of *The Wild Ass’s Skin*, Valentin attempted to financially save himself one last time through a poker game. The men situated around the table were not new to the game, and they could sense Valentin’s lack of skills. At the game, he himself described the men’s poker faces “as impassive as the faces of diplomats [with] hearts that had long ceased to pound, even when they risked losing the entirety of their wives [dowry]”.¹⁸ Men could seemingly risk their wives’ dowries on poker or on any investment that they were inclined to make. As the French newspaper *Libération* pointed out, “avant [la loi de 1965] une femme ne peut travailler sans l’accord de son mari ni ouvrir de compte en banque à son nom propre”.¹⁹

Although the money was not entirely the daughter’s, it was meant to protect her. Goriot, for example, did the best he could to make sure his daughters Anastasie de Restaud and Delphine de Nucingen would have comfortable lives. As a result, “each [daughter] was to have half their father’s fortune as a dowry”.²⁰ However, although the daughters were marriageable, their controlling husbands took advantage of their fortunes. As Delphine de Nucingen complained to Rastignac about her own husband, “as he had taken my dowry, he paid up, but he stipulated that

¹⁷Harrell, Steve, “Dowry Systems in Complex Societies”, JSTOR (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh, 1985), 106

¹⁸ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Wild Ass’s Skin*, 5

¹⁹ Malnory, Camille, “Quand les femmes ne pouvaient pas ouvrir de compte en banque” (France: *Libération*, 2015) Translation: “before [the law of 1965] a woman could not work without her husband’s agreement or open a bank account in her own name”

²⁰ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 82

in the future I should have a fixed allowance for my personal expenses, and I accepted for the sake of peace".²¹ As the funds were now her husband's, he could determine Delphine's expenses. For Delphine, this meant begging for money in secret, as she still required money to keep her status in Parisian society. Therefore, Delphine was willing to accept Eugène de Rastignac's company. Although Eugène was from a lower rank of nobility and was poor, his family connection to Madame de Beauséant allowed him to portray a higher nobility status. As Eugène was associated with Beauséant's wealth and etiquette, it was an honor for Delphine de Nucingen to be admired by him in her opera box.

At the opera as well as in their Salons, women entertained men. Entertaining men helped project the female image and made the women appear more influential. This necessity for women to appear more influential could explain why, in *Père Goriot*, Delphine's rival, her sister Anastasie de Restaud, entertained Maxime de Trailles, who was very rich and worked alongside Anastasie's husband. As Anastasie understood that Maxime was highly regarded by her husband, the count, she was able to frequently provide Maxime with attention without appearing too conspicuous. Eugène de Rastignac, appearing in de Restaud's Salon right before being disgraced, thus noticed the interaction between Anastasie and Maxime, and noted, "this woman, who was obviously in love with Maxime, who dominated her husband, and was secretly connected with the old vermicelli-merchant, seemed a total mystery to [me]".²² The act of flirting with other men, despite being married, thus proved that the women were still attractive. Such attraction was also seen as power by the surrounding society, which would not only approve of it, but consider it reassuring enough to see such a woman as worthy of being followed or even worshipped.

²¹ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 133

²² *Ibid.*, 55

A woman who attracted multiple males was seen as more beautiful, and therefore gained more attention. In *The Wild Ass's Skin*, Foedora entertained men, but never chose one. It could be said that “she had given herself to nobody in order to keep them all. A woman is a flirt as long as she does not fall in love”.²³ Even if she never planned to settle down, she found flirting with other men acceptable, as it helped her to maintain her relevance in Parisian society.

Although Raphael de Valentin truly loved Foedora, she did not reciprocate his affection, but appreciated his attention. At one point, Raphael had been meeting with her daily in her Salon even giving in to her every demand and providing her with support when needed. However, he was still not highly regarded and understood even though “[Raphael] tried to make [himself] indispensable in her life, her happiness, her vanity. Every day in her company [he] was a slave, a plaything always at her beck and call”.²⁴ Raphael was almost objectified as he was used for emotional support and to elevate Foedora’s social status.

While Foedora remained cold with Raphael, her Salon was greatly sophisticated, and it was still an honor for him to be invited in. She entertained Valentin daily, however, she did so knowing that she would never continue a relationship with him. As she had a strong control over her life, she consequently had a strong control over her Salon. Much like Foedora, women had the power to harbor influence in their Salons.

²³ Balzac, Honoré de, *The Wild Ass's Skin*, 90

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 109

Intellectual

Despite the limitations women faced, they were able to exercise control in a few areas of their lives. Although women were regarded as second-class citizens in their homes, they found solace and power in their Salons and in the outward image their Salons would allow them to showcase. As they often read philosophy and literature, both in their own Salons and the ones in which they were invited to, women developed a means to create an intellectual space for themselves that would allow them to enjoy certain freedoms and to express their own ideas.

The women, in creating the intellectual Salons, harbored men and women alike to cultivate conversation. Women also used them as a space to write novels and display their artistic abilities. Larger Salon hostesses, like Sophie Gay, used their Salons as a vehicle to publish their own writings, which is the case for Sophie Gay with artistic compositions such as *Laure d'Estell* (1864) or *Léonie de Montbreuse* (1871). Likewise, her daughter, Delphine de Girardin, used her Salon as a means to publish her own novel *Lady Tartuffe* (1853). Salons were thus not just rooms to demonstrate Salonnières' mastery of etiquette, they were intended to be intellectually stimulating. Generally, women of a higher class would be more privileged in showcasing their ideas and their homes. The most influential women would therefore receive a greater crowd of men and women who would be honored to be invited in their Salon. Balzac himself attended Sophie Gay's Salon where he found intellectual insight and he premiered publicly some his own work.²⁵

In *Père Goriot*, Eugène, like actual artists and “mondains” of the nineteenth century, introduced himself to Parisian society through his cousin, Madame de Beauséant, a woman well-

²⁵ Prescott Wormeley, Katharine, *Honoré de Balzac; A Memoir* (Boston: Hardy Pratt & Co, 1889), 118

known for the intellectual spirit she demonstrated in her Salon. She taught Eugène essential etiquette standards as well as provided him with advice in understanding the underground rules of society and its women. Without giving notice, which broke the rules of Salon's etiquette, Eugène had travelled previously to his cousin's house and entered her Salon. Before he walked into her Salon for the first time, he braced himself, as

he was thus about to see for himself for the first time the wonders of that personal elegance which reveals the soul and standards of a woman of distinction. He was all the more curious to study this for having Madame de Restaud's Salon as a basis for comparison.²⁶

As Madame de Beauséant was highly regarded in Parisian society, it followed that her Salon must have been equally impressive.

For Rastignac, the Salon served as another opportunity for social mobility. Dena Goodman noted in her studies of French Revolution's culture, "Like seventeenth-century Salons, those of the Enlightenment served purposes of social mobility".²⁷ Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this tradition continued. Additionally, the women of nobility also reserved the Salon to indulge in philosophical ideas as well as to discuss literature. Therefore, the Salon had a tremendous reputation for being an intellectual and powerful space. Goodman also said:

the Parisian Salons, already at the center of Parisian social and intellectual life, had become centers of Enlightenment. Seventeenth-century women had created the Salon as an undifferentiated social space that valued ideas and fostered discussion of them.²⁸

Continuing with the tradition existing in pre-Revolutionary France, women in the nineteenth century valued their Salons not just as a way to present their wealth and influence, but also as a

²⁶ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 59

²⁷ Goodman, Dena, "Enlightenment Salons: The Convergence of Female and Philosophic Ambitions", *JSTOR* (Michigan: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 330

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 331

way to foster intellectual conversation. Because women had received an inferior education to that of men, the Salon allowed women to have voices and opinions. By inviting renowned intellectuals and high-society individuals, women were able to engage and foster in-depth conversation.

Furthermore, since women had the ability to have rule over their Salons, Rastignac found himself removed from Anastasie de Restaud's Salon. Women had control over who was allowed into their Salons without having to justify their decisions to invite someone or to forbid someone from entering or remaining. Therefore, as soon as Rastignac mentioned Père Goriot's name, her working class father, he displeased Anastasie, since it was a reminder of her humble origin. As Madame de Beauséant informed Eugène, "you have shut the Comtesse's door against you by mentioning the name of Père Goriot. You have been banned".²⁹ In order for Anastasie to maintain the attention of her potential lover, Maxime, she denounced Rastignac, and subtly indicated to her husband to remove the young and naive provincial from her Salon. Women were able to control their visitors, which could mean they could invite them to return or banish them, more or less on a long-term basis.

Different Salons having different status, being accepted into a higher class woman's Salon like Beauséant's or Foedora's was far more of an honor. However, if one were to be rejected from a Salon of higher class, that individual might have been rejected from society overall. Therefore, one had to be careful in one's etiquette and manners when in the Salon. One could spot the difference between Salons easily, and therefore, could distinguish how much power the family possessed. For example, walking in Beauséant's Salon, Eugène de Rastignac

²⁹ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 73

“was conducted by way of a grand white staircase, with a gilded banister, red carpet, and masses of flowers”.³⁰ Madame de Beauséant’s Salon may have looked simple at first glance, but was still luxurious and sophisticated. In comparison, Eugène also visited Anastasie de Restaud’s Salon, which was less impressive. As he unsophisticatedly stumbled around Restaud’s house in search of the Salon, he noticed there was a “room containing lamps, sideboards, a towel-warmer, and leading to a dark passage and a concealed staircase”.³¹ Although there were several items that were associated with the nobility in the Restaud Salon, there was a clear distinction between Beauséant’s Salon and Restaud’s Salon. Given Anastasie’s eclectic collection of household objects cramped out of the way, one can assume that Madame de Beauséant had more influence and wealth than Anastasie de Restaud, who came from a humble background.

As nineteenth century Salons were excessively lavish, their designs were associated with power. In *A Murky Business*, for example, the family of Laurence, the main character, was ruined before the Napoleonic Wars, and the family mansion at Cinq-Cygne had to be refurnished. The novel goes into great detail about the elaborate level of design that went into the décor. Balzac wrote,

[Monsieur d’Hautesserre] had journeyed to Troyes in order to retrieve some remnants of furniture from the two pillaged mansions and brought them from the secondhand dealers....its six casement windows were now adorned with fine white lampas curtains embroidered with green floral patterns....Over the lintels of the four doors were monochrome designs such as had been in vogue under Louis XV. At Troyes he had picked up some gilt consoles, a set of green chairs in green lampas, a crystal chandelier, an inlaid card-table and all sorts of things useful for redecoration.³²

³⁰ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 60

³¹ *Ibid.*, 50

³² Balzac, Honoré de, *A Murky Business* (England: Penguin Books, 1972), 68-9

Laurence and her family decorated their home with silk furniture and lavish accessories alike, without forgetting to include the iconic crystal chandeliers, in order to display what wealth they had still left over from the 1789 French Revolution. As home décor was highly influential in determining status, Jannell Watson explained that

home décor has also been analyzed in terms of the “sociology of taste” understood as the social determination of taste as well as the difference in taste among different social groups.³³

In addition, much like their Salons, the women wanted to look the part. Women from the nobility, for example, enjoyed fashion, accessories, and the finest goods. Their desire to present themselves among other women helped to create an image of power and wealth. Anastasie was accustomed to living extravagantly, as she could be seen in “a fetching white cashmere negligée with pink bows, her hair carelessly arranged, as is the way with Parisian women in the morning”.³⁴ Dressing in such a manner separated Anastasie from a lower class, as noble women took measures to dress in the most elegant way, thus visibly distinguishing themselves from lower classes. In her study, Elinor Barber noted,

at Doué, bright-coloured hair ribbons and furbelows were worn out not only by noblewomen but also by those who by their markedly superior wealth or high profession of their husbands were distinguished from the other bourgeois families.³⁵

This “Vivre Noblement”³⁶ lifestyle, which would distinguish upper-class women from the bourgeois women who would have to live more frugally, was symbolized by extravagance and

³³ Watson, Jannell, “The Micropolitics of Home Decorating in 19th-Century France”, *JSTOR* (Canada: University of Manitoba, 1998), 21

³⁴ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 51

³⁵ Barber, Elinor G, 86

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 85

luxury. As women controlled their image by following the latest fashions, they also enjoyed showing off their wealth and influence.

Women particularly enjoyed showcasing their fashions at the opera, which was the ultimate place to show off their fashions and place themselves higher among other women. As men observed women in their alcoves at the opera using petite binoculars, to the men, the women resembled mannequins for sale in a shop window. Encased delicately in their dresses, the women sat like porcelain dolls discreetly absorbing the men's gazes.

Since women enjoyed creating a life of luxury for themselves, they also developed character masks, like mannequins, as a tool in the game of society. Madame de Beauséant warned Rastignac, "if you have any genuine feelings, hide them like a treasure; never let anyone suspect them, or you will be lost".³⁷ Madame de Beauséant understood society's manipulation and knew that by hiding one's emotions, one could ultimately protect oneself against rumors and save oneself from the pain inflicted by other people. Indeed, individuals could use others to their advantage to further themselves in society. Being genuine would have therefore been considered a weakness, since others could manipulate such naivety for their advantage. Rastignac was able to see such manipulation on his own, after many conversations with the criminal Vautrin, who lived in the same boarding-house as the young provincial, under a false identity. When he met his cousin in her Salon, Eugène noted her characteristics among those of other Parisian women. As he finally saw for himself:

these words, the gesture, the look, the tone of voice summed up the character of her caste. He saw the iron hand in the velvet glove, the selfishness beneath the good manners, the wood beneath the varnish.³⁸

³⁷ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 72

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108

Madame de Beauséant put on a lovely image for society, however, Rastignac knew her true inner beast. Egoism and self-interest ran rampant in the nobility circles. For example, Eugène himself fell under the spell of luxury, losing himself momentarily while dressing up to go to the opera with his cousin. Overcome with confidence, he theorized, “what moralists call the depth of the human heart are merely the disappointments, the involuntary reactions of self-interest”.³⁹ Rastignac quickly lost his virtuous mission while associating with the nobles, because playing the game of society became like an addiction.

Conclusion

In *The Wild Ass's Skin*, *Père Goriot*, and *The Lily of the Valley*, Honoré de Balzac portrayed the misfortunes of women in nineteenth century France. As women were seen as second-class citizens, their ability for independence was handicapped by their traditionally restricted feminine educational opportunities, and their father's guardianship. Once left their father, they were handed to their husband who took control over their dowries and thus their fortune and their whole life. As women did not have the power to possess their own money, they were seemingly under the control of their husbands' power. Men could also use women as a means of social mobility, since marrying women with larger dowries insured that they could move up in status among other men. In turn, women, despite being in these marriages, were implicitly allowed or even encouraged to flirt with other men because the attention of other men correlated to status and power.

³⁹ Balzac, Honoré de, *Père Goriot*, 105

In addition, women did have a great control over their Salons. The Salon also served as a place to meet other men, and its decor and invités were symbolic of the woman inside the Salon. By lavishly furnishing their Salons, women decorated them with silk and fine accessories to reflect the desired luxurious image, and women of nobility distinguished themselves in this way from other classes. Indeed, being disgraced from a Salon could mean rejection from society. Also, because women could choose who was invited or rejected, they directly influenced the role of men and women alike in society. Even though men had a great deal of control over them, the women still manage, through their Salons, to wield a considerable amount of power.

Balzac's detailed depiction of nineteenth century women and their Salons opens then the door to a possible continued study of social mobility as, the same way the Vauquer's boarding-house which welcomed Eugène de Rastignac presented a shifting microcosm of society, the French society in its entirety began to allow more social mobility in that post-Revolutionary time period.

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