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In *Old Goriot*, Honoré de Balzac peers into street corners too often hidden in post-Restoration France, and indeed in any time: a dilapidated boarding house, attended by those shunned or overlooked by genteel society. Balzac describes his world with a kaleidoscopic fervor, an omniscient voice that spirals through characters rich and poor, in details minute and expansive. He shows the reader the petty imagination of the penny-pinching boarding house hostess, Madame Vauquer; the diabolical conniving of the master criminal living under an assumed name, Vautrin; and the novel's hero, a young and ambitious middle-class law student, Eugene Rastignac, who struggles to balance his ambition for high society with the equanimity of his bucolic youth.

These colorfully rendered characters wheel around a mysterious pivot, an old vermicelli-maker and flour-reseller named Goriot, who provokes laughter even from the most abject of boarders. Balzac characterizes him with great humanity and bristling humor. The reader empathizes with Goriot and yet cannot help but chuckle at his appearance alongside the hardy boarders—shapeless as a flour-sack, wispy hair combed ardently into pigeon toes, mute and seemingly dumb as clay, nose hovering above bread rolls, sniffing for flour with a wine-taster's judiciousness. Goriot lives in destitution, but the reader eventually learns how he made his fortune, in re-selling flour at an exorbitant price during the French Revolution.

At the novel's opening, each boarder occupies nearly equal narrative space. But soon Rastignac draws closer to Goriot; here unfolds the novel's plot. Rastignac hears breakfast table whispers about Goriot's relationship to two furtive women visitors— young and beautiful and out-of-place at the boarding house. A few boarders joke that he

is their mutual lover, but Rastignac discovers the truth: Old Goriot has given his fortune to his two daughters, who marry vicious men and squander his money. Early in the novel, Rastignac befriends Goriot for reasons that seem cynical—to win the phantom affections of his daughter, Madame de Restaud, who dazzled him during a high society dance. But soon Rastignac scampers over to Madame de Nucingen, the other daughter, who is locked in an unhappy marriage, a vitriolic feud with her sister, and finally, coveted in the chambers of old Goriot's heart. Indeed, Goriot's unrequited affection for his daughters finds a metaphor in the novel's final pages: a silver heart holding a girlish lock of hair, which Goriot clasps as a palpable reminder of a time when his daughters were loving and innocent. Here Balzac achieves an unlikely pathos, revealing the neglected devotion of Goriot, the father, sacrificing all worldly sustenance and dying mostly unlamented—all for the sake of his unfeeling, money-obsessed daughters.

In the central paradox of the novel, Goriot loves his daughters so much that he brings upon his and their demise. He lavishes affection in the form of gifts and money, and the girls become women who succumb to the franc, hypnotic and glittering. Though a tragic figure, Goriot is no saint. Yet when it comes to his family, he has the zealousness and passion of an Old Testament God. He even welcomes young Rastignac into the hollow of his room by likening him to a son.

Balzac reveals the evolution of one conscience by giving Rastignac the greatest proportion of page space. Rastignac's peregrinations begin in the world he knows best—the underworld of Madame Vaquer's boarding house—and end in the glamorous “humming hive” of the Parisian upper-class. Yet he does not fit well into either culture. Rastignac has all the merits and faults inherent in youth. He is decent and humane to his

fellow boarders, and shuns the overtures of Vautrin, who tries to lure him into a scheme that involves murder and prostrations of false love, then marriage, all on behalf of money. As a law student, he is the novel's fledgling arbiter of virtue and shame, and the reader's moral guide. But he struggles with Vautrin's outlaw philosophy, and he begins to see the laws of society as vacuous and finally cruel. At first, Rastignac desires superficial esteem, and knowingly seeks the gilded love of society women so that he can flee the supposedly tarnished life of the lower-class. But by the end, Rastignac confronts multiple and jostling truths: "He had seen society in its three great assets: Obedience, Struggle and Revolt; or in other words, the Family, the World and Vautrin; and the necessity of choosing one of them dismayed him. Obedience was boring, Revolt impossible, and Struggle hazardous." (271) Minted with the bitter tears of old Goriot's death, Rastignac vows to struggle in the novel's final line. But at least for this moment, he no longer seeks to win the affections of the undeserving rich.