

Cousin Bette

By

Honoré de Balzac

"You began the story of Samson; finish it. — Do a Delilah cutting off the Jewish Hercules' hair. ...What you have to show is the power of woman. Samson is a secondary consideration. He is the corpse of dead strength. It is Delilah — passion — that ruins everything." [Delphi]

I'd like to discuss three points: Balzac's goal in writing the Human Comedy. Then, the infusion of Balzac's philosophy and personal life experiences into the Human Comedy. Finally, the place of Balzac's work in the larger context.

Purpose of the Human Comedy

As a reminder, most of Balzac's works - about 90 of them, were conceived or repurposed to create a unified whole called the Human Comedy. Balzac clarified that...

"French society would be the real author; I should only be the secretary. By drawing up an inventory of vices and virtues,... the principal incidents of social life, ... I might perhaps succeed in writing the history which so many historians have neglected: that of Manners ...I might produce for France ...the book which we must all regret that Rome, Athens, Tyre, Memphis, Persia, and India have not bequeathed to us; that history of their social life [Delphi]

Did he succeed both as a novelist and as an historian of manners?

His success as a novelist is for your judgement. Those I've read: Lost Illusions, Pere Goriot, Cousin Bette, Eugene Grandet, and a few others - suit my tastes. Still, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder". I can say only: "for me, he succeeds". The likes of Proust, Hugo, and James sing his praises, while Flaubert gives the backhanded comment:

"What a man he would have been had he known how to write!" Flaubert (Wikipedia).

How well did he record French social life? We must turn to contemporaries. He was successful in his time and I don't think that would have happened, nor would he be regarded as the father of French Realism had his observations been inaccurate.

James Baldwin noted:

"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." [Wikipedia]

The Marxist Engels stated:

"I have learned more [from Balzac] than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians put together". [wikipedia]

I think history has passed a similar judgement on this account.

How the philosophy and life of Balzac influences his work

Here are some ways I've seen Balzac's thinking and life influence his writing:

1. Balzac believes his writing should advance his opinions

"The law of the writer,..., is his judgment, whatever it may be, on human affairs, and his absolute devotion to certain principles. [As Bonald says] "A writer ought to have settled opinions on morals and politics; he should regard himself as a tutor of men; for men need no masters to teach them to doubt,".... I took these noble words as my guide long ago;" [Delphi]

Narrator frequently become moralizer. For example when Hulot returns from Josepha's rejection:

"[Hulot's look at Adeline] confirmed her in her opinion that gentleness and docility were a woman's strongest weapons. But in this she was mistaken. The noblest sentiments, carried to an excess, can produce mischief as great as do the worst vices." [Cousin Bette, p80 Everyman's Edition]"

Balzac expands this idea into a theme of the work. Adeline's behavior is depicted as enabling - a driving force - contrasted with that of Hortense's response to Steinbock.

2. Balzac's opinion of man, religion and society is evident. Balzac writes:

“Man is neither good nor bad; he is born with instincts and capabilities; society, far from depraving him, as Rousseau asserts, improves him, makes him better; but self-interest also develops his evil tendencies. 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.” [Delphi]

These views are reflected in his characters: Hortense is both wise to move out on Steinbock and foolish in her deceptions. Josepha is greedy - even cruel - but softened by Adeline's piety. Even the most wicked Valerie, repents and leaves her fortune to the Hulot's. M Crevel, rejects the church 'til the end. Societal norms, laws, and family honor are bullworks against bad behavior - ignored, of course, by Hector. Contrast this with the characters in Les Miserables, for example: Javier, Thenadier - evil. Bishop Beinvenue, Fantiene, Cosette - nearly angelic.

3. Balzac honors the effective and criticises the naive dreamer

This might be a form of self-praise. He characterizes Steinbock as a lover of conception - a lazy avoider of production. Bette, though malicious, is effective and rational. Balzac regularly idolizes the hard-working young provincial seeking his fortune in Paris, against all odds. Adeline is pious but foolish - even culpable.

4. Money and debt play a central role as it did in his life. Every price is known. We almost always know the financial positions and motivations of characters. *Henry James notes that...*

“Each particular episode of the “Comédie Humaine” has its own hero and heroine, but the great general protagonist is the twenty-franc piece.” [Wikipedia]

Balzac in the context of French and other literature

Concerning Balzac's place in French literature, this is my very (stress very) simple version.

Romanticism was the dominant movement in early 19th century France, emphasizing the authenticity of human emotion. Led by the likes of Hugo and Dumas, it was partially a reaction to the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason. In short: emotion, feeling, larger than life characters and situations. E.g. the final scene of the Hunchback of Notre Dame with Esmeralda and her mother.

The realist movement had its peak from about 1830 to 1860 - Stendhal and Balzac being key players. It features believable, multi-dimensional characters and situations. Emphasis on accuracy and detail - but still dramatic. A device used by Balzac is the reuse of characters in the various novels of the Human Comedy. They pop in and out of stories naturally -adding

depth. E.g. Baron NUCINGEN is a witness at the Steinbock wedding but also marries one of the daughters of Pere Goriot. Rounding out the trio of famous realist is Flaubert.

Naturalis - a more “brutal realism” that often focussed on the lower classes - followed. It stressed the role of environment in defining character and a nearly scientific observation of detail and cause and effect. A classic in this genre is Zola’s *Germinal* which I read last year and loved. Zola was criticized for sketching his characters so dryly that they were no longer interesting or memorable.

Within this framework, how was Balzac influenced? Many point out similarities in plot to Shakespeare. E.g. Pere Goriot is compared to King Lear without Cordelia. *Cousin Bette* has been compared to Iago from *Othello*. He read to excess - even dictionaries - as a child. However, the general opinion seems to be that Balzac’s skill evolved from his hard work and observational skill.

His late-night, coffee-fueled hard work was legendary and probably killed him - some blame *Cousin Bette* specifically having been written in only 2 months. We have Starbucks, but the Germans have Balzac Coffee. Being only 51 when he died, his ~ 100 works were produced in ~ 30 years.

His ambition was huge and had he lived longer, we might have 150 works. His *Human Comedy* spanned: scenes from private life, provincial life, Parisian life, political life, military life, country life - to which he added works on philosophy and analysis.

Lazy he was not.

Regarding his observations, Balzac’s knowledge of the intricacies of French culture and his apparent research are equally impressive as is the breadth of settings. E.g. *Pere Goriot* is a study of life in a Paris boarding house. *Lost Illusions* focuses on the printing world with a detailed examination of printing mechanics in the opening pages. Eugene Grandet depicts the life of a miserly provincial in the wine business. *Sarrasine*’s supporting character is a castrato - a male singer castrated before puberty to obtain the combination of male strength and female vocal register.

He also drew from his life experiences: he failed at law, tried to kill himself, was blackmailed, carried on affairs, was habitually in debt, etc. - he led an active and socially engaged life.

Henry James, an admirer of Balzac wrote:

“No writer ever served a harder apprenticeship to his art, or lingered more hopelessly at the base of the ladder of fame.That so vigorous a genius should have learned his trade so largely by experiment and so little by divination; ...this is something which needs explanation ...Balzac was to be pre-eminently a social novelist; his strength was to lie in representing the innumerable actual facts of the French civilization of his day — things only to be learned by patient experience...the complex French world of the nineteenth century.” [Delphi - Essay by H James on Balzac]

Whom did he influence? Apparently most of the writers after him. James, Tom Wolfe, Proust, and other greats mention his influence. Indicating just how real Balzac's characters are, Oscar Wilde said:

"One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré.... It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh" [Wikipedia]

Even the actress Bette Davis changed the spelling of her first name to match Balzac's character.

Closing

You might have noticed the similarity between Hector Hulot and Victor Hugo in name, their sexual reputations, and the incident they share of being caught publicly in bed with their lovers. Even their wives names are similar: Adeline and Adèle. If Balzac so incorporated Hugo, we'll end with Hugo's eulogy for Balzac.

"Balzac was one of the first among the greatest, one of the highest among the best.All his books form but one book,—a book living, luminous, profound, where one sees coming and going and marching and moving, ... all our contemporary civilization;—a marvelous book which the poet entitled "a comedy" and which he could have called history; ... which surpasses Tacitus and Suetonius; which traverses Beaumarchais and reaches Rabelais;—a book which realizes observation and imagination, which lavishes the true, the esoteric, the commonplace, the trivial, the material, and ...allows us all at once a glimpse of a most sombre and tragic ideal." -- Eulogy of Balzac by V. Hugo, August 20, 1850

References

Delphi = Balzac, Honoré de. Delphi Works of Honore de Balzac with the Complete Human Comedy (Illustrated) (Kindle Locations 568-572). Delphi Classics. Kindle Edition.

Wikipedia = any one of the main pages on Balzac or his works. Also the pages on 18th, 19th and 20th century French Literature and the pages on Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism.