

The Education of Eugène de Rastignac in *Père Goriot*

"Society is monstrous and wicked" (p. 82). This notion from Honoré de Balzac's *Père Goriot* is one of the first teachings of early nineteenth century Paris and its infamous society given to the novel's protagonist, Eugène de Rastignac. A young man of humble beginnings, Eugène finds a passion to succeed in society, and thus embarks on the city of Paris after receiving some education from three important characters: his stately cousin Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant, his own loving mother, and his fellow border Monsieur Vautrin.

From the south of France, Rastignac was born into a family that lost its wealth a few generations past. Rastignac says, "We are the junior branch of the family, and we're all the poorer because my great-uncle, the vice admiral, lost all he had serving the king. The republican government refused to admit our claims when it liquidated the East India Company" (p. 64). Eugène's family was neither rich nor poor; wealthy enough to maintain their farm but without enough money to be entertained in high society. Balzac describes Eugène's financial standing as such, "Although he had to be sparing of new clothes, and the best suit of one year had to be the everyday suit of the next, he could on occasion appear dressed like a fashionable man-about-town (p. 17). In addition to being easily handsome, Eugène de Rastignac was also smart. The young man was put up in Paris by his family for one reason: to become a lawyer. *Père Goriot* picks up as Rastignac returns to Paris, ready for his second year of law school. The reader learns that, "During his first year, the small amount of work necessary for the first [law] examinations had left him time to savor the visible, material delights of the town... and he begins to distinguish the strata that compose human society" (p. 34). It was at this time that Eugène realized he had

completed an "apprenticeship" and was thirsty to climb the social rankings of Paris. Therefore, Rastignac took his focus from his law books and honed it toward learning the ways of Parisian society.

Eugène de Rastignac's first teacher of society was his own distant cousin, Madame la Vicomtesse de Beauséant. Another cousin nearer to the Rastignac's wrote a letter to Madame de Beauséant asking her to take the young man under her influential and respected wing. To Eugène's joy and surprise, he received a reply with an invite to a Beauséant ball. Wearing his best suit, Eugène was received at the luxurious Beauséant home, where he used his southern charm and good looks to secure a dance with the beautiful Madame de Restaud. Anastasie Restaud was buxom and charmed Eugène back, and invited him to call at her own respectable home soon. So young, naive Eugène called upon Madame de Restaud to find her in an already uncomfortable interaction with her husband (Monsieur le Comte de Restaud) and her lover (Comte Maxime de Trailles). Eugène did not yet understand the intricacies of Parisian socialites and their crowded boudoirs, nor whose name to drop and whose name to eliminate utterance. This lack of knowledge could have abolished his chances of climbing society's sad rungs that very day at Madame de Restaud's, when he mentioned Old Goriot, another fellow boarder whom he saw leaving the Restaud residence at his own proud arrival. Rastignac was out on the street in no time, not fully understanding what pain mentioning Old Goriot would cause. So, he sought his faithful cousin to teach him what he did wrong.

Eugène called upon Madame de Beauséant where he learned about the past that Madame de Restaud wished to keep hidden: "Madame de Restaud was a Mademoiselle Goriot" (p. 79). Old Goriot was more than just the scapegoat at boardinghouse dinners, he was proud father of two beautiful daughters: Anastasie de Restaud and Delphine de Nucingen. Here is where the

sadness of Père Goriot's life comes to play - he married off his two daughters to social climbing monsters who left them without money and without love. These marriages were seen as a failure to Monsieur Goriot, who sold everything he had to keep his daughters happy - and only when he could supply them with money would they care to see him. This loving father had two brats for daughters. However, Madame de Beauséant used this story to offer an educational plan for Eugène: "You want to be a success: I will help you. You shall really find out how corrupt the women are here, and how despicably vain the men... The more coldly you calculate, the further you'll go... you will never get on here without a woman to look after you. She must be young, and rich, and fashionable" (p. 82-83). And just after this first taste of a society lesson, Madame de Beauséant hatched her own plan, gave her young cousin her distinct advice, "If you introduce [Madame de Nucingen] to me, you'll be her little favorite, she'll worship you. Love her afterward, if you can; if not, just make use of her" (p. 83). She advises Eugène to ask his housemate Goriot to introduce him to his lesser-known, social climbing daughter Delphine. She tells Eugène that, "If women think you're clever and talented, the men will think the same... You can go for anything you choose then, you'll have a foothold everywhere" (p. 84).

While his cousin encouraged Eugène to secure a lover to gain power in Paris, his own mother begged him to keep his head in the study of law. The young Rastignac wrote to his mother and two sisters about a financial deficit he encountered that prevented him from pursuing a new avenue in Paris. With a return letter containing 1,550 Francs, his mother said, "I could never again, even to save your life, find such a sum for you without letting your father know, and that would make trouble here at home" (p. 97). On the subject of her son's undetailed plans, his mother seems to really know what Eugène is implying, and asks him: "Are you going to throw away your life and happiness, pretending to be something you are not, and going about with

people you can't possibly mix with without spending money you can't afford? My dear boy: you must be sensible and grown-up. The future of so many people you love depends on you; and your success will be ours too" (p. 98). In her letter, Eugène's mother is asking her son to be tactful and forget the excitement of society; Rastignac decides to try to please his mother in the way he wants, by turning her last Francs into millions.

With money in his pocket, Eugène de Rastignac was ready to begin the necessary transformation to impress the banker's wife, Delphine de Nucingen. Before he could begin his climb to the upper echelons of Parisian society, the knave Vautrin challenged young Rastignac to some education of his own. Vautrin says, "I've given a great deal of thought to the nature of your present predicament... I want to show you exactly what position you're in... there are only two courses open to a man: stupid obedience, or revolt" (p. 108). And with those words, how could the impressionable Rastignac not listen to the lessons in society that Vautrin was about to give? Of course this strong and even fearful man told Eugène to revolt, to be a reckoning force in Paris. He teased Rastignac with the following, "[You'll need] a million [Francs]... I'm going to give it to you" (p. 108). After that, he outlined the "only" options that Rastignac had in life. First was to finish law school and become a thankless, hungry lawyer. The next, slightly better scenario involved becoming a public prosecutor with a tolerable salary. Or, Vautrin pointed out, Eugène could use his law to follow the rich around, being a low person in society, which would still require a hefty payout each month. Vautrin wraps up these taunts by saying, "The problem with quick success is the problem that fifty thousand young men in your position are trying to solve, at this very moment You are a single one in that battle" (p. 111).

After scaring Rastignac with these horror stories that could one day be his life, Vautrin implants a horrible plan into his brain that will stay with him for a long time: "In Paris, an honest

man is one who keeps his mouth shut, and takes and doesn't share. My idea is to go and live a patriarchal life on a huge estate... I need two hundred thousand Francs...If I can arrange a dowry for you of a million Francs, will you give me two hundred thousand?" (p. 112-114). Eugène eagerly asks what he would need to do, and Vautrin finally outlines his master plan, to kill off a son so that the father would reconcile with his daughter, therefore sending her into marriage with quite a large dowry. In Vautrin's world, this is the lesson plan that Eugène should follow passively: however, the thought of a death caused by his own hand scared Eugène so much that he told Vautrin, "Don't say any more, sir, I don't want to hear it" (p. 118).

To conclude, it is important to remember the lessons taught by his three instructors: Madame de Beauséant, his mother, and Vautrin. Of course his mother begged Eugène to be a good boy and focus on law school. Vautrin suggested murder and betrayal as a means to succeed in society. And finally, the first lesson that Rastignac had learned, taught by his wealthy cousin Beauséant, is the educational plan that he chose to follow. He set his eyes on Delphine de Nucingen, and immediately made plans to rise to high society along with this pretty girl, one of Goriot's daughters. Will Eugène de Rastignac succeed in Parisian society? You must read *Père Goriot* to find out.