

Joseph Luzzi • Balzac, *Père Goriot*
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Please note: the below are only intended to help you “get inside” the book—please do not feel compelled to answer them in full, unless you wish to, and if there are questions or elements in the book that you don't understand, no worries, we will explain all when we meet for our discussion!

1. What are the qualities that make Honoré de Balzac one of the most important novelists of the 19th century? How would you compare his writing style to that of more contemporary novelist today?
2. Rastignac first appears as a main character in Balzac's writing in *Père Goriot*, and he also plays important roles in other works by Balzac as the author charts Rastignac's social rise in French high society. Why do you think that Balzac chose to devote such creative energy to exploring Rastignac's social ascent? What makes this character and all he represents so vital to Balzac?
3. The theme of paternal love and the nature of the family are both essential to the narrative of *Père Goriot*. What stands out to you in Balzac's depictions of the relations between this father and his daughters? What main points does Balzac seem to wish to convey in this regard?
4. What does *Père Goriot* reveal about the principles and protocols of Parisian elite society?
5. *Père Goriot* begins:

Mme. Vauquer (nee de Conflans) is an elderly person, who for the past forty years has kept a lodging-house in the Rue Nueve-Sainte-Genevieve, in the district that lies between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel. Her house (known in the neighborhood as the Maison Vauquer) receives men and women, old and young, and no word has ever been breathed against her respectable establishment; but, at the same time, it must be said that as a matter of fact no young woman has been under her roof for thirty years, and that if a young man stays there for any length of time it is a sure sign that his allowance must be of the slenderest. (trans. Marriage)

What does the passage reveal about Balzac's writing style? What are its keywords? And how are the novel's main themes and concerns indicated or suggested in this passage?

6. How is Mme. Vauquer's boarding house a "society in miniature," that is, a microcosmic sample of French society writ large? What do the characters both individually and collectively suggest about French society as a whole?
7. What is the function of the character Vautrin in the novel? What does he seem to embody or represent?
8. How are issues of gender and sexuality, as well as female identity, depicted in *Père Goriot*?
9. Based on your reading of *Père Goriot*, would you describe Balzac as a moralist? Why or why not?
10. What makes *Père Goriot*, which was written nearly two hundred years ago, relevant to our world today? Was there any particular aspect of it that struck a personal chord with you? If so, why?

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