

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Date: March 3, 2015

Hosts: Whitney Lloyd and Carol Fox

Novel: *Le Pere Goriot*, by Honore de Balzac

Papers:

Biographical: Jill Mushkat Conomy

Critical: Jack Conomy

Members and friends of The Novel Club of Cleveland gathered at the home of Whitney Lloyd on the still-wintery evening of March 3, 2015. After opening refreshments and conversation, President Anne Ogan called the meeting to order at 8:16 p.m. She thanked the hosts for arrangements, including sidewalk shoveling. Guests were introduced. Minutes of last meeting, having been circulated electronically, were accepted as written.

Committee reports: Treasurer was not present, but The Novel Club is deemed solvent based on recent reports; Program Committee has things well in hand, per Nicholas Ogan on behalf of chairman Leigh Fabens. Motion was made to table discussion of membership to the Sunday, April 26 annual meeting. Tom Slavin will be hosting the annual meeting, and probably will be interested in contributions of food and funds in support of that effort. The President suggested that people come to the regular April meeting prepared to sign up for such contributions. No other business being raised, we proceeded to presentation of the papers.

Jack Conomy delivered both Jill's biographical paper and his own critical paper, both of which will be re-forwarded to Ham Emmons and posted on the club's web site. The overriding theme of this combined presentation was announced as a question whether this book is more about love, or more about money, or equally about both?

Jack and Jill did not provide discussion questions; Jack suggested rather that members pose questions and responses at will. The below account of discussion attempts to group together comments on roughly related issues.

Style of writing:

One reader thought the book started off seeming somewhat preachy, and therefore rather offputting. Some others found the extraordinary detail impressive and engaging. One recalled having as an undergraduate found the work impressive, but upon recent re-reading felt instead that the style was florid and overblown, even operatic. This shift was attributed to a change in the reader, rather than in the text.

Character of Rastignac

An opening question was raised as to whether Rastignac's actions seems to be motivated more by love or by money. Opinions varied from seeing Rastignac as on the one hand being "blinded by his own youth and sexual energy" into an undeserved fascination with Goriot's daughters to, on the other hand, being entirely aware of the evil characters of the Goriot girls and intending to exploit them to the utmost through use of his own physical attractiveness and connection to his higher-class cousin.

One reader noted that Rastignac appears in many of Balzac's novels, at chronological settings that take him up to the age of approximately 48, at which time he is quit well-established

and has a good income of his own. Thus, Balzac seems to use this character to illustrate how French society of the time works, at least for an individual who has “no particular principles except personal gain.” Where by the end of *Pere Goriot* Rastignac seems perhaps to be moving toward a career as a “kept man” with little security of his own, the later episodes suggest rather that he has learned to operate advantageously within the system of French society in his day. He realizes the manipulative character of the Goriot girls, but will in turn manipulate them via his own personal attractiveness and connection to his higher-class cousin.

Social Commentary Element of the Novel

Related to the above-outlined comments about Rastignac were recurring comments as to the narrative attitude of the novel. Readers disagreed as to whether the novel amounts to 1) a satire on the materialism and social-climbing fixation of the society portrayed, which would imply criticism via mockery of the society’s flaws—this reading takes Goriot’s daughters as stock characters, but not overblown;

or, contrastingly,

2) a melodrama, with exaggerated portrayals of good and evil designed mainly for emotional effect;

or, again contrastingly,

3) a sharply pointed and tragic rather than satirical commentary on the issues of social status and family ingratitude, featuring Rastignac’s calling on his family to support his social ambitions and Goriot’s daughters playing re-cast versions of King Lear’s Goneril and Regan. Here, the absence of any “Cordelia” figure would emphasize the sad and disillusioned view of contemporary French society, which Balzac may have shared with Proust.

In this general area, one reader suggested that Balzac’s work could be compared to that of Theodore Dreiser in that it is very focused on the drive for social climbing. Dreiser takes a different approach, but seems to have the same underlying concern as Balzac—how to use society’s structure to accomplish social-climbing goals, whether they are worthwhile or not?

It was also noted that Balzac here writes mainly about the top 10% or so of French society, so even though it is called “realistic” it does not depict life for most people in France of the time. However, perhaps the boarding house residents represent more of a microcosm, and to some extent their responses to events function like those of the Chorus in classical Greek drama.

Questions were also raised as to the function of moral values in the novel. Moral values as a force, readers thought, seem generally to lose out when in conflict with opportunities for social advancement. It is not clear whether Pere Goriot himself is happy, or admirable, or an ironic figure, though it is clear that his daughters’ responses to his death, however realistic or instructive they may be, are painful to witness. The character of Vautrin has plenty of advice to offer, and seems to represent the “voice of the devil,” yet unfortunately finds a ready audience.

Other topics of comment included the early Darwinism of Balzac’s worldview; idealism, determinism, and other philosophical concepts; education of women and of society in general; and the continuing operation of station, status, and privilege in society as a whole. At approximately 10 p.m. the meeting closed, with plans looking forward to the April meeting at the Saunders home.