

The female mentor as vital and problematic in pere goriot



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In her towering box at the fashionable opera house, Mme de Beausant “ was scanning the theatre with her opera-glasses, and though apparently taking no notice of Madame de Nucingen, did not miss her slightest move” (112). The vicomtesse, as though an all-knowing omnipresent figure in this scene, is thus the most suitable mentor for Rastignac, the penniless student. Her role in the novel points out not only the necessity for the female mentor in Balzac’s bildungsroman plot, but also demonstrates the power of women in Parisian society and how it is problematic. When Anastasie reveals her social skills by downplaying Eugne’s blunder of mentioning Pere Goriot, she justifies the narrator’s comment praising her for possessing “ that remarkable ability which women are endowed” (54). This is not the only instance in the novel in which the female sex is admired. For example, even at the end of their affair, the vicomtesse’s command over the Marquis d’Ajuda forces him to fearfully conceal his engagement to Mademoiselle de Rochefide. Earlier on, in the scene where Eugene first visits Anastasie, he sees her in a cashmere negligee, and the narrator describes his reaction by stating, “ young men’s eyes take everything in; their spirits react to the radiation given off by a woman as a plant breathes in from the air the substances it needs” (51). The word needs here, clearly emphasizes great power. In Pere Goriot, the power of female agency is not, however, always a mystical and abstract power displayed by the above incident, but rather, most of the time, female characters demonstrate social power. In the novel, men duel with actual swords while women use words and gestures as “ daggers”. This is apparent in a scene in which the duchesse de Langeais pays the vicomtesse a visit in order to inform her friend that the marquis is to dine at the Rochefide’s. The injured vicomtesse retaliates and as the two

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friends engage in a verbal battle the narrator uses phrases such as “ felt the question like a stab in the heart,” “ looking daggers,” and “ the blow was too violent” (65-66). Furthermore, it is also probably not a coincidence that the person who annihilates Eugene with a mere look is a woman: “ the duchesse treated Eugene to one of those arrogant looks which scan a man from top to toe and leave him feeling squashed and worthless” (66). For these reasons, it makes absolute sense that Eugene, entering a social battle, would seek a powerful woman to be his mentor. On the surface it seems as though Eugene approached Mme de Beausant merely because they are related. When he pleads for her help he states, “ I need one to teach me what you women explain so well: life” (64). The fact that she is part of the “ you women” makes her the appropriate mentor, and even Mme de Beausant agrees that a woman is necessary for the job when she explains to the duchesse that Eugene “ is looking for a woman to teach him good taste.” When the vicomtesse is put up to the task of finding a woman for Eugene, Monsieur d’Ajuda confirms, “ no one but you could have picked out a woman for him at the very moment when she [Delphine] needs comforting.” From another standpoint, Eugene has been offered mentorship from one other character, Vautrin, who bears many similar qualities with the vicomtesse. Like Mme de Beausant, who stands at the top of Faubourg Saint Germain possessing a sort of all-knowing awareness, Vautrin, the treasurer of an underground criminal society, seems to know everything as well. As the vicomtesse is aware of Delphine’s innermost thoughts that “ she [Delphine] is devoured by jealousy” of Anastasie, her older sister (72), Vautrin knows Eugene has stolen his sisters’ money (96) and that while Anastasie was “ laughing, dancing, larking about, with her peach-blossom waving and her dress

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gathered up, she was like a cat on hot bricks...at the thought that her bills of exchange, or her lover's, might not be honoured"(43). Not only do both potential mentors have access to important information, but both come up with plans that would bestow Eugene with a young, beautiful woman and wealth. Vautrin advises Eugene to marry Victorine, who will inherit her father's fortune once her brother is killed, and the vicomtesse tells Eugene to win over Delphine de Nucingen. Both Mme de Beausant and Vautrin's plans for Eugene's success are wickedly rooted on the exploitation of others, and although the vicomtesse's plan does not involve murder, her suggestion to take advantage of sisterly rivalry is immoral. As each urges Eugene to combat the corrupt world, they sound almost identical. Success is vital, for Mme de Beausant tells Eugene that " in Paris success is everything, it is the key to power" (73), and the master criminal encourages the student to " succeed! succeed at any price" (96). Vautrin suggests that " it's no good being honest" (97), mirroring the vicomtesse's opinion that " the more coldly calculating you are, the further you will go" (72). Despite the similarities between the lessons Mme de Beausant and Vautrin offer, Eugene is disturbed by what Vautrin has to say. He believes that Vautrin's advice is " bluntly what Madame de Beausant put more delicately" (104), but even more importantly that Vautrin's words " ripped" his heart " with claws of steel"(104). Mme de Beausant's advice, on the other hand, does not upset him. Eugene admires her for her nobility. " He has always found the vicomtesse courteously affable, full of that easy grace conferred by an aristocratic upbringing" (108). There are times when Eugene feels differently about the vicomtesse, however, but soon after each time he feels snubbed by her, " his bitter thoughts were soon dispelled" (109). Mme de Beausant is <https://assignbuster.com/the-female-mentor-as-vital-and-problematic-in-pere-goriot/>

the best possible mentor in the novel in many other ways. The vicomtesse is part of the aristocratic world and her name magically opens all doors. Under the novel's bildungsroman structure, a male mentor represents the father who is to be rid of or forgotten, thus confirming that the most suitable mentor is a woman. In a more practical point of view, in *Pere Goriot* a person of the same sex is almost always competition. There is rivalry between Mme de Beausant and Mme de Rochefide, Mme de Beausant and the duchesse de Langeais, Delphine and Anastasie, and when Eugene first sees Maxime at the Maison de Restaud, he mentally declares war on Anastasie's lover. Lastly, if hypocrisy is the key to succeeding, then the vicomtesse is the best mentor of all. On the very night of her Ball, the night her love affair comes to an end, the night she plans to leave Paris for a convent in Normandy, "she appeared to everyone like her usual self, and looked so exactly as she had looked when happiness filled her with radiance, that even the least sensitive admired her, just as young Roman women applauded the gladiator who managed to die smiling" (234). Although her mentorship proves to be necessary for Eugene's rise up the social ladder, Mme de Beausant's role as mentor is problematic in many ways. Eugene too often feels belittled by her and must "grovel, put up with anything" because "in a matter of moments the best of women can withdraw her promised friendship and cast you off like an old shoe" (109). Eugene is sensitive of her treatment towards him and on one occasion of her snubbing him, "the most trivial events of his life conspired to drive him into a course of action in which...he must, as on the battlefield, kill or be killed, deceive or be deceived" (109). While the vicomtesse's condescension and the luxuries that she represents both pushes and entices him to choose the immoral path, his rejection of Vautrin's

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counsel forces him to question himself. After Vautrin's confrontation in the second chapter of the novel, Eugene rejects the cynical world offered him and exclaims " I want to work with honour, with integrity! ...Success will come very slowly that way, but everyday I will be able to lay my head on my pillow with a clear conscience" (104). The very next day, he is visited by the tailor and once " seeing himself well dressed, with smart gloves, smart boots, Rastignac forgot his virtuous resolution" (105). The elegance of his new clothing is just as attractive as Mme de Beausant and the lavish world of Faubourg Saint Germain. This is the prime dilemma of Mme de Beausant's mentorship; she is responsible for sparking Eugene's desire to rise up the ladder for it was her invitation, in the earlier part of the novel, which opened the doors of high society to her cousin. When Mme de Beausant tells Eugene what he must do, he does not question the morality of her suggestions as he does with Vautrin's lectures. She is the mentor who teaches the same corruption as Vautrin, but masks its ugliness just as women mask their true appearance with make-up. Works Cited Balzac, Honor. Pre Goriot. Trans. A. J. Krailsheimer. New York: Oxford UP 1999.