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Feeding Off of Greed

Honore de Balzac's novel *Pere Goriot* not only tells the story of a poor old man and his spoiled daughters, but it tells a somewhat overlooked tale of the transformation of Eugene Rastignac. Rastignac is a young law student who moves to Paris to complete his education and is funded by his parents. As he immerses himself into the elite society of Paris, his innocent dreams of attaining fame and fortune slowly corrupt him. Throughout the course of the novel, Rastignac evolves from being a naive and conscientious young man to becoming a skilled social parasite.

Eugene Rastignac came from a small and lowly peasant lifestyle and had a great ambition for success; however, as a young and naive student he was ineffective at separating himself from the poverty he had always known. As a young man exploring the city of Paris, he knew he could not be satisfied with the simplistic and frugal life his family led. When Rastignac thought of his family and their financial troubles, his dream of attaining a great wealth solidified in his mind. Just like every other young adult trying to find himself or herself, he wanted fame and fortune. The only problem with this grand goal of his was that he did not know how to put it into action. "...when it came to carrying things out, his decisions were thus subject to the kind of hesitation that afflicts young men on the open sea, unsure where to apply their energies or at what angle to set their sails" (28). Rastignac was lost in Paris with a goal of becoming rich and famous and almost no idea of where to begin in order to attain that ambition. He didn't know where to start on his quest for fortune, but he knew enough to realize that he needed to make social contacts and he immediately convinced his aunt to allow him to attend a ball. "Thanks to his aunt de

Marcillac the poor student had been welcomed in that house without appreciating the extent of such a favor. Admittance to these gilded salons was as good as a certificate of the highest nobility” (29). Rastignac was welcomed into his aunt’s house as an ignorant young man and was unaware of the extremely competitive and privileged environment he had just stepped into. This invitation to mix with the elite provided him an opportunity to create a name for himself in society. Despite this minor step forward, Rastignac was quite naive about it and found false success in the interactions with the aristocratic women. Rastignac, being merely a poor and naive student, held no appreciation for high society at this point. He disregarded the fact that his ability to mingle with the aristocrats happened only because he was already related to nobility. Rastignac also overlooked what it took to get into a ball like that by oneself, dismissing the amount of wealth and power normally required to even gain entrance to a social gathering of the elite.

Rastignac’s naivety is first broken by the awareness of how essential money is to attaining social status. As he continually interacts with the aristocracy, Rastignac becomes increasingly savvy to the importance of fortune. Fine materials dominate the upper class and determines the social hierarchy. This need for materialistic goods begins to infect him as well, “The demon of luxury gnawed at his heart, the frenzied desire to make money gripped him, the thirst for gold made his throat dry. He had a hundred and thirty francs a quarter to live on.... This rapid comparison between his present situation and the goal he had set for himself contributed to his state of shock” (62). As time progresses, Rastignac begins to feel a powerful greed build inside him. It pains him physically to desire wealth as his greed clenches him in a unyielding grasp. His realization that he has no immediate means to actualize this money cripples him and

brings a reality check to his dream of being rich and famous. Rastignac has finally begun to see the enormous sums of wealth and prestige it is going to take in order to reach his ultimate goal of social dominance. This realization is the first point that his veil of naivety is lifted and he can clearly see the long and difficult road ahead of him in his quest to climb the social ladder. This clarity is verified after he meets with Madame de Beuséan and he truly realizes the extent of power that the simple possession of money grants a man in Parisian society. “He saw the world as it is: laws and morality unavailing with the rich, wealth the *ultima ratio mundi* [the world’s final authority]. ‘Vautrin is right, wealth is virtue’” (74). Rastignac quickly realizes that honor and morality have no meaning to the rich, that it brings no power to be virtuous person. Instead, wealth is what brings someone power. The wealthier they are, the more powerful they can become. After observing the affluent, Rastignac comes to the conclusion that one’s fortune is judged rather than their virtue and therefore a person only needs wealth to be accepted into the high society.

Aristocrats have no need for a hierarchy based upon morality and virtue when one’s worth can simply be determined by counting and comparing their monetary wealth. Rastignac however is still a little bit naive and resolves to earn the money honorably and remain conscientious of his fellow man. “Rastignac resolved to open up two parallel lines of advance in his assault on fortune, to rely both on knowledge and love, to be a learned doctor of law and a man of fashion. He was still very much a child! These two lines are asymptotes which can never meet” (74). Rastignac has good intentions of making his fame and fortune as honorably as he possibly can by finding a balance between his educations of law and society. He is still unenlightened of the fact that there will never be a satisfactory balance between the two lives. In

order to climb the social ladder one will only be able to focus in either knowledge *or* love rather than both as he proposed. The narrator describes the two paths in life as asymptotes which means that they will never intersect and so, Rastignac will be forced to choose between the two. He knows that living the life as a man of law will be an honorable one, but the materialistic life as a man of parisian fashion would bring him an extremely high social status.

As Rastignac is gradually enlightened to the corrupt materialism that is essential to the Parisian lifestyle, his own moral resolutions are broken down as well. As his quest for fortune and acceptance intensifies so does his greed. His deterioration of compassion for his family is apparent when he writes home asking for more money.

My Dear Mother,

After all you have already given me, see if you cannot draw on some fresh source to help me... I need twelve hundred francs, and I must have the sum at any price....if I do not obtain this money I shall be plunged into such despair as to make me blow my brains out (76).

Rastignac implores his mother to give him even more money than she is already sending him. He begs her to find another source which she could draw twelve hundred francs from. He threatens that he will fall into a deep despair if the money is not sent and that this depression could even cause him to kill himself. Rastignac knows that his family cannot afford to send him anymore money but he proceeds to ask them anyway. The fresh source he asks his mother to find will cost his family much more than he will benefit from it and rather than seeking the money elsewhere he chooses to place the burden on his family who are already supplementing his entire life. He goes on to elaborate on his “need” for money by stating that he without it he will kill himself. By emotionally blackmailing his poor mother, Rastignac ensures that he will receive the money.

This is the first time in the novel that Rastignac intentionally and selfishly manipulates people and allows his greed to overshadow his conscience. This shallow manipulation furthers his education as a social parasite and his naivety continues to diminish as he implements his newfound rule that 'money is virtue'. After writing and sending the letters to his family, Rastignac advances from mere acknowledgement of the corrupt ways of a Parisian aristocrat to actually acting and behaving as those aristocrats. His intentions of earning his fortune honorably disappear and he gives into the ways of the social food chain.

Rastignac continues to further his reliance on his sisters and Pere Goriot as he dives deeper into the materialistic lives of the elite. He realizes how shallow many people are but continues to crave their attention and acceptance. Finally, during Goriot's dying days, Rastignac fully articulates his acceptance of the corrupt society he is apart of when he is speaking to Bianchon. "My friend... stay on the path that leads you to the modest goal you have been content to set yourself. As for me, I am in hell, and must stay there. No matter what ugly things you may hear about the world, you must believe them. A Juvenal could not depict the horrors masked by its gold and glittering jewels" (238-239). Rastignac tells the younger boy that he must not follow in Rastignac's footsteps for he will end up in "hell". Rastignac also acknowledges the fact that he is in too deep with the high society and cannot escape it despite the ugly truth hidden behind its glamour. He tells Bianchon that no matter how horrible a story is about society, it must be taken as the truth. It is obvious that Rastignac regrets the path he chose and instead wishes that he had strove for an honorable life of modesty. While he regrets his decision to be swept up in the Parisian life, he recognizes that there is no turning back and it is too late for him now. He is no longer naive and cannot bring his innocence back. He now sees society as all of its horrors

hidden beneath the glitz. Rastignac knows that it is extremely difficult to believe the shallowness of society, so much so that he says Juvenal, a roman satirical poet who denounced the lax and luxurious upper class, wouldn't be able to depict the vile truth about Parisian society. At this point in the novel, Rastignac is fully aware of the path ahead of him and accepts the horrors of society marking his final steps in his evolution into a social parasite.

Rastignac's final point of evolution from a naive boy to a skilled social parasite is when he lets go of his past ideals. After Goriot dies, Rastignac ends up paying for the old man's funeral and is one of the only attendants. "...he looked at the grave and buried in it the last tears of his youth. Tears wrenched from him by the sacred emotions of a pure heart, such as tears fall on earth to only rebound up to heaven" (263). When Goriot dies and Rastignac cries over him, his tears represent his last bit of innocence and childhood fading away. The tears are produced by an innocent part of his heart and this innocent part of him dies as his tears 'rebound up to heaven'. Paying for and grieving Goriot's death is Rastignac's greatest act of selflessness in the novel. It marked his last act as a conscious and naive country boy who had no intention of hurting or manipulating others. Buried with Goriot are the last tears of youth indicating that he has given up on trying to preserve that part of him. The tears from a pure heart have died and gone to heaven and now Rastignac has accepted the hellish society and the sycophant it has caused him to become. In this state of acceptance, Rastignac proceeds to declare war on society while he looks over the city of Paris. "He gave this murmuring hive a look which seemed already to savour the sweetness to be sucked from it, and pronounced the epic challenge: 'It's between the two of us now!' And as the first shot in the war he had thus declared on Society, Rastignac went to dine with Madame de Nucingen" (263). Society is depicted as a murmuring hive which indicates that

it will become a life source for Rastignac and many others, storing away sweet gold in its caverns. The sweetness to be sucked from it is a direct reference to the fact that Rastignac is now a fully functioning social parasite ready to suck as much as he can from the Parisian society. He is hostile towards society and declares war on it indicating that he is fully aware of the fight every social climber must endure. It is him against the world now, every man for himself. His compassion for any fellow man or woman has evaporated completely. Despite the talk of war and fighting society, Rastignac then goes to dine with Madame de Nucingen proving that he is not fighting to stay virtuous and honorable anymore. Instead, no longer concerned with his childhood ideals and morality, he declares war on society with the intent to rise to the top and conquer it.

Eugene Rastignac is at first opposed to the idea of giving into the social evils such as deceit and greed, but as the novel progresses and he is immersed deep into the elite Parisian lifestyle, he begins to thrive and feed off of others fortune. His innocent goal of attaining fame and fortune lead him down a dark path which transforms him into a greedy man with little conscience. Rastignac's evolution from a naive country boy to a fashionable social parasite is seen through many events throughout the novel.