

Honoré de Balzac

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Honoré de Balzac



Portrait of Honoré de Balzac

Born: 20 May 1799
Tours, France

Died: 18 August 1850
Paris, France

Occupation: Novelist, Playwright

Genres: Novel, Novella, Play, Short story

Literary movement: Literary realism

Influences: Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire
Walter Scott

Influenced: Henry James
François Truffaut
Gustave Flaubert
Émile Zola

Honoré de Balzac (French IPA: [ɔ̃nɔʁe də bal'zak]) (May 20, 1799 – August 18, 1850), born *Honoré Balzac*, was a nineteenth-century French novelist and playwright. His work, much of which is a sequence (or *Roman-fleuve*) of almost 100 novels and plays collectively entitled *La Comédie humaine*, is a broad, often satirical panorama of French society, particularly the *petite bourgeoisie*, in the years after the fall of Napoléon Bonaparte in 1815—namely the period of the Restoration (1815–1830) and the July Monarchy (1830–1848).

Along with Gustave Flaubert (whose work he influenced), Balzac is generally regarded as a founding father of realism in European literature. Balzac's novels, most of which are farcical comedies, feature a large cast of well-defined characters, and descriptions in exquisite detail of the scene of action. He also presented particular

characters in different novels repeatedly, sometimes as main protagonists and sometimes in the background, in order to create the effect of a consistent 'real' world across his novelistic output. He is the pioneer of this style.

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Biography

Balzac's literary output began with chronicles and sketches on widely varied social and artistic topics. The journals to which he contributed were increasingly looking for short fiction, which

Balzac was able to provide. A collection *Scènes de la vie privée* (*Scenes from Private Life*) came out in 1829, and was well received: these were tales told with a journalistic eye which looked into the fabric of modern life and did not shun social and political realities. Balzac had found a distinctive voice.

He had already turned out potboiler historical novels in the manner of Walter Scott and Anne Radcliffe, on commission from publishers, but only under pseudonyms ('Horace de Saint-Aubin', for example, was responsible for the scandalous *Vicaire des Ardennes* (1822), banned for its depiction of pseudo-incestuous relations and, more importantly, of a married priest). With *Le Dernier chouan*, however (1829) he entered the mainstream as an author of full-length fiction.

This sober tale of provincial France in Revolutionary times was soon overshadowed by the success in 1831 of *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*), a fable-like tale delineating the excesses and vanities of contemporary life. With public acclaim and the assurance of publication, Balzac's subsequent novels began to shape themselves into a broad canvas depicting the turbulent unfolding of destinies amidst the visible

finery and squalor of Paris, and the dramas hidden under the surface of respectability in the quieter world of provincial family life.

In *Le Père Goriot* (*Old Father Goriot*, 1835), his next big success, he transposed the story of *King Lear* to 1820s Paris to rage at a society bereft of all love save the love of money. His novels are unified by a vision of a world in which the social and political hierarchies of the Ancien Régime had been replaced by a pseudo-aristocracy of favouritism, patronage and commercial fortunes, and where a "new priesthood" of financiers had filled the gap left by the collapse of organised religion. "There is nothing left for literature but mockery in a world that has collapsed" he remarked in the preface to *La peau de chagrin*, but the cynicism grew less as his oeuvre progressed and he revealed great sympathy for those whom society pushes to one side when the old certainties have gone and everything is up for grabs.

Along with shorter pieces and novellas there followed notably *Les Illusions perdues* (*Lost Illusions*, 1843), *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (*The Harlot High and Low*, 1847), *Le Cousin Pons* (1847) and *La Cousine Bette* (1848). Of novels in provincial settings *Le curé de Tours*

(*The Vicar of Tours*, 1832), *Eugénie Grandet* (1833), *Ursule Mirouet* (1842) and *Modeste Mignon* (1844) are highly regarded.

Many of his novels were initially serialized, like those of Dickens, but in Balzac's case there was no telling how long they would end up. *Illusions perdues* extends to a thousand pages after starting inauspiciously in a small-town print shop, whereas *La fille aux yeux d'Or* (*Tiger-eyes*, 1835) opens grandly with a panorama of Paris but ties itself up as a closely-plotted novella of only fifty.

Balzac's work habits were legendary — he wrote for up to 15 hours a day, fuelled by innumerable cups of black coffee, and without relinquishing the social life which was the source of his observation and research. (Many of his stories start with fragments of the plot overheard at social gatherings, before uncovering the real story behind the gossip.) He revised obsessively, sending back printer's proofs almost obscured by changes and additions to be reset. Even a sturdy physique like his paid the price of his ever expanding plans for new works and new editions of old ones. There was unevenness in this prodigious output, but some works which are really only work-in-progress such as *Les employés* (*The Government Clerks*, 1841),

are of real interest.

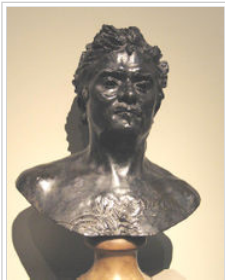
The writer would often spend long periods staying at Château de Saché, near Tours, the home of his friend Jean de Margonne, who was his mother's lover and the father of her youngest child. Many of his often tormented characters were conceived in the small second floor bedroom where he would often work long into the night. Today the Chateau is an evocative museum dedicated to the life of Balzac.

Curiously, he continued to worry about money and status even after he was rich and respected, and believed he could branch out into politics or into the theatre without letting up on his novels. His letters and memoranda reveal that ambition was not only ingrained in his character, but acted on him like a drug — every success leading him on to enlarge his plans still further — and ahead of time, around 1847, his strength began to fail. A polarity can be found in his cast of characters between the profligates who expend their life-force and the misers who live long but become dried-up and withdrawn. His contemporary Victor Hugo exiled himself to Guernsey in disgust at French politics, but lived on to write poems about being a grandfather decades after Balzac's death. Balzac

himself could not, by temperament, draw back or curtail his vision.

In 1849, as his health was failing, Balzac travelled to Poland to visit Eveline Hanska, a wealthy Polish landowner in Wierzychownia, with whom he had corresponded for more than 15 years. Enduring the writer's complicated terms of endearment, such as "nelly curieux," the

meddling Eveline lavished Balzac with patience throughout his stay in Poland. They married in Berdyczów in 1850, but shortly thereafter Balzac departed for the western coast of France to mediate the continued enrollment of his brother David in the prestigious seminary, "Études Mathématiques." The Breton Provost - a direct descendent of Bishop Berkeley- informed Balzac that there was little



Bust of Balzac by Auguste Rodin, in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

likelihood that the protracted matriculation of his brother would be granted and three months later, Balzac died.

He lies buried in the cemetery of Père Lachaise, overlooking Paris, and is commemorated by a monumental statue commissioned from Auguste Rodin, standing near the intersection of Boulevard Raspail and Boulevard Montparnasse.

"Henceforth" said Victor Hugo at his funeral "men's eyes will be turned towards the faces not of those who are the rulers but of those who are the thinkers." the funeral was also attended by Frédéric Lemaître, Gustave Courbet, Dumas *père* and Dumas *fils* et al.

Quotes

"Behind every great fortune there is a crime"

Works

La Comédie humaine

La Comédie humaine consists of 95 finished works (stories, novels or analytical essays) and 48

unfinished works (or which exist only as titles). It does not include Balzac's 5 theatrical plays or his collection of humorous tales, the *Contes drolatiques* (1832-37).

Selected titles of *La Comédie humaine*:

- *Gobseck* (1830, a novella, one of Balzac's earliest successes)
- *La Peau de chagrin* (1831)
- *Eugénie Grandet* (1833)
- *Le Père Goriot* (text) (1835)
- *Illusions perdues* (I, 1837; II, 1839; III, 1843)
- *La Cousine Bette* (1846)
- *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1847)

Plays

- *Cromwell* (1820)
- *Ressources de Quinola* (1842)
- *Paméla Giraud* (1843)
- *La Marâtre* (1848)
- *Mercadet ou le Faiseur* (1848)

Tales

- *Contes drolatiques* (1832-37)

Legacy

After his death Balzac became recognised as one of the fathers of Realism in literature, and distinct in his approach from the "pure" Romantics like Victor Hugo. *La Comédie humaine* spanned more than 90 novels and short stories in an attempt to comprehend and depict the realities of life in contemporary bourgeois France. In the 20th Century his vision of a society in flux, where class, money and personal ambition were the major players, achieved the distinction of being endorsed equally by critics of Left-wing and Right-wing political tendencies.

He guided European fiction away from the overriding influence of Walter Scott and the Gothic school, by showing that modern life could be recounted as vividly as Scott recounted his historical tales, and that mystery and intrigue did not need ghosts and crumbling castles for props. Maupassant, Flaubert and Zola were writers of the next generation who were directly influenced by him, and Marcel Proust acknowledged his influence.

In one of his last tales, *Les comédiens sans le savoir* (*The Unwitting Actors*, 1847) a provincial is rescued from a ruinous speculation by a boulevardier who asks him "Will you not now concede, my friend, that Paris is bigger than you are?". What Balzac had brought to fiction was the social context, a factor unrecognized by the Romantics, for whom the inner world of the individual was all that counted.

In the 1960s, the counter-culture unearthed two strange and mystical novels from Balzac's early years: the quasi-autobiographical *Louis Lambert* (1832) and *Séraphîta* (1834), in which an angel guides the gender-bending hero/heroine around the solar-system. Some academics have claimed that alchemy, animal-magnetism and other esoteric theories underlie Balzac's interpretation of society, and that his credentials as a Realist should be questioned. This idea, explored in particular by French critic Albert Béguin in his collection of essays *Balzac lu et relu* (1965), emerges from a remark attributed to Charles Baudelaire, who observed that Balzac's work was not so much 'observational' as 'visionary'. More recently, critics have conjoined these two models of a visionary and Realist Balzac to create a more nuanced

version of his work. The critical literature on Balzac is moreover very large, and one can find almost any shade of opinion if one looks for it.

In 1970 Roland Barthes published *S/Z* – a detailed analysis of Balzac's story *Sarrasine* and a key work in structuralist literary criticism.

It is Balzac the observer of society, morals and human psychology who continues to appeal to readers today. His novels have always remained in print. His vivid realism and his encyclopedic gifts as a recorder of his age outweigh the sketchiness and inconsistent quality of some of his works.

In the 1990s, one of Balzac's stories, *A Passion in the Desert* was made into a feature film with the same name starring Ben Daniels.

Balzac was adapted into a character in Orson Scott Card's alternate history novels of the series *The Tales of Alvin Maker*. In this he is presented as crude, but deeply witty and insightful man.

See Also

- *Passion in the Desert* - A 1998 film based on one of Balzac's short stories

- Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress - A 2005 film highlighting the influence of Balzac's work on several individuals facing reeducation during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s.

Notes

External links

- Greta Garbo & Balzac
- Works by Honoré de Balzac at Project Gutenberg
- *Honore de Balzac by Albert Keim and Louis Lumet*, available at Project Gutenberg.
- Bio and selected works
- Reader's Guide: Themes in the Novels of Balzac
- Honoré de Balzac's works: text, concordances and frequency lists
- Balzac and anthropology:
- Balzac on mimetism, language, desire for the absolute
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- Pathfinder

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By category

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18th century - 19th century
20th century - Contemporary

French Writers

Chronological list
Writers by category
Novelists - Playwrights
Poets - Essayists
Short story writers

France Portal

Literature Portal

"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor%C3%A9_de_Balzac"

Categories: 1799 births | 1850 deaths | People from
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| French fantasy writers | Burials at Père Lachaise
Cemetery | Roman Catholic writers | French
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