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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol4/iss1/6

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HON 111
28 October 2018

Savagery in *Père Goriot*

Honoré de Balzac’s novel *Père Goriot*, depicts life in the boarding house owned by Madame Vauquer. Honoré de Balzac describes the behavior of the seven occupants of the boarding house in a very descriptive and inhuman way. The residents of the house each have unique personalities that do not always align, leading to some hostile situations and conversations in the house. Balzac depicts the characters and society in *Père Goriot* as different animals who act in savage ways.

Balzac’s initial animalistic references depict the tenants as creatures viewed as being harmless, when in reality, they are slowly becoming noxious. The author portrays Eugène Rastignac, one of the residents, as a bird: “In short the bird which only yesterday had no wings has now spread them in full flight” (Balzac 88). Balzac uses this descriptive metaphor of a bird to show Rastignac’s newfound confidence. It depicts that before receiving the letters from his mother and sister regarding the money he asked for, he lacked any and all power or standing in society, shown by the bird with “no wings.” After receiving the letter and money, Eugène instantly moved up in society and gained power to take on the world, “spread[ing] [his wings] in full flight.” Later in the novel, Vautrin, another occupant of the boarding house, speaks to Rastignac about one of their fellow residents describing him as a bug: “He is less than nothing if his name is Poriet; you can squash him like a bug, he is flat and he stinks” (148). He continues, further on, with a comparison to a toad: “You won’t squelch about for long in the swamps that are home to the little toads who are all round us here” (148). The dramatic metaphor and simile in these quotes further the animalistic theme in the novel.
The beastly symbols become more intense throughout the novel. Balzac uses imagery that slowly crescendos to full savagery. He introduces violence in the metaphors when Madame Vauquer scolds her residents: “You men live like fighting cocks” (123). He brings to light the antagonism in a relaxed fashion but still proceeds with a simile comparing the men to animals. Further on, his increasingly corrupt imagery is seen: “You might as well start rebelling against human conventions from today. It would mean always having to crawl like a reptile in front of a wife, licking her mother’s feet, doing deeds vile enough to turn a sow’s stomach” (96). The comparison of a human to a reptile is offensive enough but Balzac does not stop there. He adds the word “vile,” creating an even more negative connotation. Previously, he compared the government to a savage guard dog: “For someone as generous as you, it means starting, after enough trouble and hardship to drive a dog mad, by becoming some joker’s deputy, in some dismal town where the government will toss you a salary of a thousand francs like a sop to a butcher’s dog. Bark at thieves, defend the rich and send men of spirit to the scaffold” (95).

Balzac not only depicts his characters as monsters, but society as a whole. The final shift from mediocre violence to full savagery appears with the simile of crabs: “You’ll have to devour each other like crabs in a pot” (97). The harsh negative connotation of the words “devour” and “crabs” shows the growth of the vulgar presence leading to complete barbarism.

The characters ruthlessness is further conveyed throughout the rest of the novel. Père Goriot, the protagonist, shows his fierceness when defending his daughters: “I know the law, I’m an old wolf. I’m going to show that I still have sharp teeth” (137). He uses a metaphor to compare himself to a wolf, an animal seen as a beast in society. He continues to demonstrate his malice when he mentions his “sharp teeth.” The beastly animal references continue, now with lions: “If you were pale and sluggish you would have nothing to fear; but we are hot-blooded as lions and have appetite enough to drive us to commit a score of follies every day” (95). The fact that the characters see themselves as hot-blooded lions further portrays Balzac’s depiction of the brutal theme. The most bloodthirsty quote of all, does not even mention a
specific animal, only beastly actions: “If you ever betray her I should slit your throat at once” (121). The lack of specific reference to an animal proves that the characters have lived in brutality among themselves for so long, they have become monsters in their own way.

Honoré de Balzac uses similes, metaphors and other forms of comparisons throughout *Père Goriot* to depict his character and society as savage animals. He does so in differing degrees of brutality through the rhetoric. The varying intensity is effective when portraying savagery as a whole. Although the exponential degree of grotesque subjects is not linear throughout the novel, it shows the different moods and attitudes at particular points still describing the theme altogether.
Works Cited