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21L.472 Major European Novels
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FIRST PAPER

Papers are due on Thursday, October 9th, and should consist of approximately four pages, which is to say no less than 12,500 characters. Please put your name, the title of your essay, and the character-count on a title page. (Any reasonable word-processing program will give you a character-count.) PLEASE NUMBER THE PAGES and START WITH THE FIRST PAGE *AFTER* THE TITLE PAGE.

The following topics are meant to be suggestive—the starting-point for thinking through an essay. Please remember that you are not writing a book-report but an essay, which must have an argument, a point to make about the book(s) covered. In consequence of observing this distinction, it follows that you should not give an outline of the plot or description of incidents and characters unless (a) it is directly relevant to a point that you are making about the book and (b) you are reminding your reader of the evidence for your argument. In other words, you should assume that the reader of your essay has read the book and already knows what is in it. Finally, the point of your argument should not be so obvious that no argument against it can be imagined; you shouldn't be arguing a thesis for which no sensible alternative exists.

To elaborate slightly: (1) An essay has a thesis (e.g., the "real" hero of *Père Goriot* is Vautrin); (2) your choice of thesis implies a puzzle that you are resolving (e.g., the title of the book suggests that Goriot is the protagonist of the book); (3) your thesis should have in mind the possibility of some alternative view of the matter (Rastignac is the hero) which is sensible.

These introductory remarks are not meant to provide you with the form of an outline for an essay but with the background assumptions that will keep your essay from sounding like a ramble among unassimilated details or a rehearsal of the obvious (or what is worst of all, a sermon: e.g., Vautrin is a bad person and we should all dislike him). You are making a case for a view (an interpretation) of some aspect of a text.

Suggested Themes and Topics

The famous novelist, Thomas Mann, in an essay on *Don Quixote*, expressed astonishment at the presence of the so-called "interpolated" story of Lucinda, Dorothea, Don Fernando, and Cardenio in the book. The book mocks the unrealities of tales of knight errantry, Mann complained, and yet it presents a story of misguided or thwarted love written in a similarly unrealistic style. We have not read any "books of knight-errantry" (although Cervantes provides a plot summary or general outline for the *genre*) but we must suppose that while both the books of knight-errantry and the Lucinda-through-Cardenio episode are "unrealistic" from a twentieth-century viewpoint, in the view of Cervantes and his contemporaries they were not unrealistic in the same way. The point about good literature, for Cervantes, was not that it should be realistic but that it should be "truthful"--meaning by this that it should responsibly illustrate general truths about human relationships and do so in an ingenious way. (The point is made occasionally in the text and most strikingly in the passages that we have read by the canon who falls his with Don Quixote and his friends on their final journey home.) Comment.

Don Quixote is a reader of bad literature--he is also a bad reader of literature. Do the two characteristics go together? Does bad literature injure your sense of reality? Is the book adequate to this theme? Alternatively, drawing upon specific episodes, examine some of the ways in which Don Quixote is a bad reader and show how this moves him to act in comic or foolish ways.

Discuss the relation between Don Quixote and Sancho in any way that seems interesting. In his first venture in search of adventure, Don Quixote has only Rocinante as a companion. There are those who say that Sancho was an after-thought, while others argue that Cervantes must have had him in mind

from the start. Which of these views do you favor? What does the presence of Sancho add to the meaning of the book? Is Sancho essential to its conception? Is he more sensible than Don Quixote, less sensible, closer to reality or equally mad but in a different way?

We may quote Thomas Mann once again. "Don Quixote is of course a simpleton. But his obsolete whimsy is also the source of such true nobility, such purity of life, such winning and respect-compelling traits, that our laughter over his grotesque and doleful countenance is always mingled with amazed respect." As a comic figure, Don Quixote is obliged to suffer innumerable indignities in the book. Yet subsequent generations of readers have found in him admirable qualities that survive this treatment--perhaps despite his author's intention--and regarded him as something more than just a figure of fun. Were they right or wrong and why? Is there something about Don Quixote's ambition, mad though it is, that nonetheless makes him superior to all the indignities that the book heaps upon him? Discuss in connection with one or two episodes in the text--for example, the episode of the fulling-mills or the episode of freeing the convicts.

The parts of Cervantes's novel that deal with the adventures of the knight and his squire are full of tricks that would mock any reader proposing to take the story seriously. By means of a number of narrative devices (the chapter headings, for example, or the suspension of narrative in mid-combat, when the author complains that his historical sources have run out) and other gimmicks, one is constantly reminded that--whatever the overall purpose of book--one is reading a narrative entertainment, not the sort of narrative that the canon or the curate would approve of as a serious or responsible work of literature. Discuss some of these tricks or jokes and their effect upon the reader.

"He [Eugène] had seen the three attitudes of men toward the world: obedience, struggle, and revolt; the family, society, and Vautrin. He dared not choose among them." Explicate this passage from *Père Goriot*. Why dare Eugène not choose among them?

The first American translation of *Père Goriot* ended at the words "Seeing him thus, Christophe slipped away" (on p. 275 of your text) and then added the following: "The reader may believe that Eugène returned to the Maison Vauquer thoroughly cured of his fancy for Parisian high-life and female patronage, and that in due time he married Victorine and took up his abode in the provinces." Comment.

Discuss the ethical issues raised by "the problem of the mandarin" in *Père Goriot* in relation to the plot.

The Marquis d'Ajuda-Pinto is about to marry Mlle de Rochefilde, but Eugène's cousin, Madame de Beauséant, only suspects this, is the last person in the world of fashion to know. When Eugène first visits her, the Marquis makes a slight movement when he hears the footman announce that a third party is about to make an appearance, and Madame de Beauséant guesses at the truth. "And so it must be recorded that Madame de Beauséant had observed her lover's involuntary movement--slight, but so simple as to be frightening". (p. 71.) Much of the book is concerned with the way in which Eugène learns to interpret such trifles--small gestures, subtle alterations of tones, a second meaning lurking beneath the apparent meaning of a phrase. Balzac takes it for granted that the reader will understand perfectly why a tiny gesture in these particular circumstances may provide evidence for the vicontesse's conclusion. In part, the book is a chronicle of a young man's education in the ways of fashionable society, penetrating appearances and learning how to conceal his own feelings. ("Never let anyone suspect your real feelings," says the vicontesse to him, "or you'll be lost." [p.82]). Take any instance of subtlety in verbal exchange or observation by Eugène and show how it works and what Balzac expects his reader to understand.

In the world of Balzac's Paris, power depends, paradoxically, upon the appearance of having

power; that is why for those who want power, being mocked by the raised eyebrow of a servant can humiliate so deeply. (You might try explaining, in connection with this notion of the power of appearances, both the wit and the appropriateness of Rastignac's remark about his tailor: "I know two pairs of his trousers that have made marriages worth twenty thousand francs a year." [p. 99.]) In contrast, Don Quixote's power is all delusion, but there is a paradox involved here as well: his delusion is such that he can never be convinced that he doesn't have any, and so he cannot be humiliated. Comment on the theme of humiliation or upon the contrast just drawn.

Mme de Beauséant says to Eugène that she will lend him her name, which she asks him not to disgrace, and then he appeals to his mother and daughters for the means to acquire "the weapons" (suitable clothing and transportation). It sounds a bit like a knight-errant starting out on his career. The comparison becomes explicit when Delphine sets him up in his own apartment. (p. 207) "Success is everything in Paris; it's the key to power." What is meant by "career" and "success" in the context of this book?

Why can women be exploited? They crave *respectability*, while the respectable aristocracy craves money. All is appearance--but only in Paris; the countryside remains a possibility. The passage on p. 217 that declares this speaks of the "strength to dominate but how or to what end he did not know". A remarkable idea. Compare Don Quixote with the sentiment that follows: in the absence of a pure love, power can be a fine thing in itself if pursued for the glory of country.

The mutual courtship of male and female in Balzac's high society is a zero-sum game: there is always a winner and a loser. In the text, women are largely manipulated by men--they are weaker. This is a feature of Balzac's fiction--women who can love at all wind up as victims, because sooner or later their beloved exploits or betrays them. Women are constant in love, men love and then fall out of love--that is the Balzacian general rule. Eugene's story is one version of this. Discuss the role of women of fashion in *Père Goriot*--the ability to patronize young men such as Eugène, their susceptibility to being victimized by husbands and/or lovers.

After their confrontation in the garden, Eugène thinks of Vautrin: "That man must have a brain of iron! he told me bluntly exactly what Madame de Beauséant told me in polite phrases. He told me more about virtue than I've ever learned from men or books." What are the teachings of Vautrin? How would you elucidate his character and the kind of temptation that he represents? Are his views, indeed, endorsed by Mme de Beauséant in the speech to which Eugène refers?

At one point, Balzac announces the theme of his book as tracing "the devious ways by which an ambitious man of the world gets the better of his conscience as he tries to skirt round evil, so as to achieve his aim while preserving appearances . . ." (pp. 129-30.) Is this the theme? Elucidate.

Vautrin: Virtue is indivisible--hence go all the way to crime. True? Goriot: they are committing all crimes in this one. True?