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Father Goriot

Honoré de Balzac · *1835 · Ellen Marriage translation (1896)*

In a cheap Paris boarding-house a law student, a disguised convict, and an old man who has given all he has to two ungrateful daughters are thrown together. Balzac shows how Paris educates a young man in desire, and how a father's love, spent without wisdom, can be devoured. Rastignac's last look over the city is a declaration of war.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does Paris teach a young man to love—and can a father's boundless sacrifice, without justice or measure, save anyone it is spent upon?

"And with that tear that fell on Father Goriot's grave, Eugene Rastignac's youth ended."

Narrator · Closing pages

Goriot's love is real and unwise: he strips himself for Anastasie and Delphine, and they will not come to his deathbed. Vautrin offers Rastignac a shorter road, a crime dressed as worldliness. The young man will not take that road, but after the tear at the grave his youth is over, and he looks at the city and says that henceforth there is war between them. The book leaves him on the threshold of that war, not crowned by it.

KEY CHARACTERS

Jean-Joachim Goriot
A retired vermicelli-maker who loves his daughters past wisdom, and is devoured

Eugène de Rastignac
The provincial student whose education in Paris is the book's other plot

Vautrin (Jacques Collin)
A convict in hiding, brilliant and corrupt, who offers a shortcut

Delphine de Nucingen
The younger daughter, Rastignac's lover, married to a banker

Anastasie de Restaud
The elder daughter, in the old nobility, and in debt for a lover

Mme de Beauséant
Rastignac's cousin, who teaches him the rules of the great world and is herself wounded by it

Bianchon
The medical student, Rastignac's decent friend at the deathbed

Mme Vauquer
The landlady, whose house is a small world of appetite

A FATHER'S TEARS, AND A CITY CLAIMED

> *"And with that tear that fell on Father Goriot's grave, Eugene Rastignac's youth ended."*
> **Narrator** · Closing pages

> *"Henceforth there is war between us."*
> **Eugène de Rastignac** · Close of the tale

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Maison Vauquer
THE BOARDING-HOUSE AND ITS PEOPLE

A shabby house in the Latin Quarter holds more plots than its table suggests.

- Madame Vauquer's pension shelters students, retirees, and the mysterious Vautrin
- Eugène de Rastignac, a poor gentleman from the provinces, comes to study law and to rise
- Father Goriot, mocked as an old fool, lives poorer and poorer as his daughters live more richly
- The house is Balzac's window onto Paris: appetite, gossip, and hidden ties

02
The Education of Rastignac
ENTRY INTO THE FAUBOURG

A cousin's introduction opens the great world, and the student needs more money than a student has.

- Rastignac is introduced by his cousin Mme de Beauséant, who warns him what society costs
- He sees Goriot's daughters, Anastasie de Restaud and Delphine de Nucingen, in that world
- To go there he must have clothes, a cab, and money; the provinces cannot long supply them
- He begins to love Delphine, and to use Goriot's devotion as a road to her

03
Vautrin's Bargain
THE TEMPTATION

A hidden convict offers a crime that would make Rastignac rich in a stroke.

- Vautrin, who is not what he seems, proposes that Rastignac marry Victorine Taillefer after her brother is killed in a duel Vautrin will arrange
- The bargain is worldly sense without a conscience
- Rastignac is tempted and will not consent
- Vautrin is unmasked as the criminal Jacques Collin and taken by the police

04
The Father's Last Hours
GORIOT'S DEATH

The daughters will not come in time; the father still blesses them.

- Goriot has given his last resources to pay his daughters' debts and pleasures
- He falls ill; Rastignac and the medical student Bianchon tend him
- Anastasie and Delphine are detained by their own affairs and arrive too late or not at all
- He dies calling for them; a cheap funeral follows

> *"And with that tear that fell on Father Goriot's grave, Eugene Rastignac's youth ended."*
> **Narrator** · Closing pages

05
War between Us
THE CEMETERY AND THE CITY

A tear ends a youth; a sentence begins a career.

- At Père-Lachaise, Rastignac weeps, and the narrator says his youth ended with that tear
- He goes to the highest point of the cemetery and looks out over Paris, the shining world he wished to reach
- He says, magniloquently, that henceforth there is war between them
- He throws down the glove by going to dine with Delphine, Mme de Nucingen

> *"Henceforth there is war between us."*
> **Eugène de Rastignac** · Closing sentence of the tale

Fatherhood | Ingratitude | Ambition | Temptation | Paris and Society | The End of Youth

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. This is Ellen Marriage's English of 1896 (Project Gutenberg #1237). Rastignac's last line is "Henceforth there is war between us," not the French "À nous deux."
2. The hosted EPUB adds, after the last line, an addendum of Comédie humaine character reappearances. The tale itself ends with the dinner at Mme de Nucingen's.
3. Goriot's love is not held up as a complete model. It is genuine, and it is without measure; the daughters are not made better by being given everything.
4. Vautrin's speech is the book's temptation: rise by a crime and call it knowledge of the world. Rastignac's refusal matters, even if his later "war" is ambiguous.
5. The tear at the grave and the declaration of war belong together. Youth ends; the kind of man he will be is not yet settled.

Quotations are verbatim from the Ellen Marriage translation (1896), Project Gutenberg #1237, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/balzac-father-goriot/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.