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21L.472 Major European Novels
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Balzac, *Père Goriot*

1. Consider three notions of the idea of "viewpoint" in connection with this novel, and also with the others that we will read:
 - a. The interests that animate the various characters or supply their motives and thereby explain their actions; the value that they put on things.
 - b. The values that the narrative itself seems to espouse in the way that it disposes of characters and deals with their ambitions in working out the plot; what used to be called the sense of "poetic justice" that the story exhibits in making each character wind up a certain way.
 - c. The way in which what any given character knows jibes with or seems to provide the information that the narrative voice conveys. For example, "Paul's eyes glittered as he spoke" cannot express the viewpoint of Paul. It may express the viewpoint of someone in the story (in this case the person or persons to whom Paul is speaking), or it may express a viewpoint impossible to anyone in the story. In this text, the narrative viewpoint is largely identical with Eugène, its protagonist; the narrative voice even remarks at one moment that "were it not for the friendship between these two people [Eugène and Goriot], we might never have learned the outcome of this story." Since the story is a fiction, there is something odd about such an assertion. What is the point of tying the narrative viewpoint so closely to the viewpoint of a single character in a story when the story is not narrated in the first person? How many points can you identify where the narrative viewpoint is not available to Eugène?
2. Compare the tone of the narrative voice at the outset of *Don Quixote* with the tone of the first paragraphs of *Père Goriot*? The voice insists that "this is not a novel". What is the point of this assertion?
3. What does the word "success" mean in this book? What does the idea of "a career" mean? What does the word "society" mean? Compare the viewpoint of Madame de Beauséant with the viewpoint of Vautrin on "society". Eugène thinks to himself that they are the same. Are they?
4. How does Eugène win the affection of Mme de Beauséant when he first meets her? How characteristic is what he says at that moment of the ways in which people relate in the book? Do you believe that you would be as adept as Eugène in understanding motives and knowing what to say? More adept? Less?
5. Eugène discovers the existence of "triangular domesticity". What does this phrase mean? What sort of world is it in which love and marriage are acknowledged as distinct forms of commitment? Under what conditions in the world that Balzac depicts can a man be humiliated by others knowing that his wife is having an affair with another man? Why is the Vicontesse de Beauséant humiliated by the public knowledge that the man she loves is about to marry an hieress?
6. Why is the novel called *Père Goriot*? Is it badly named by its author? How did Goriot make his money and why is his existence an embarrassment to his sons-in-law?
7. What keeps Eugène from marrying Vittorine de Taiffier and achieving his ambitions in this way? Why does he not inform the police of Vautrin's murderous scheme with regard to Vittorine's brother?
8. Vautrin despises morality but professes to be absolutely trustworthy. Does he have any fixed principles of conduct or is he simply a villain? He says: "There are no principles, only events." What does the phrase mean? Explain in this context the problem posed by the "puzzle of the Mandarin" which Eugène elaborate to his friend Bianchon. What is the point of the puzzle?

9. Money is very important to the characters in *Père Goriot* and seems constantly to invade their lives. "Mixing money with love," says Delphine; "It's awful!" Is it awful? Why do the various characters need so much money? And why are the sums involved left so unspecific?

10. "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. Why dare Eugène not choose among them?

11. The last thing that Eugène does is "to throw down the gauntlet to society by going to dine with Delphine." What is the implication of this phrase? How does Eugène wind up in his struggles between a desire for success and his hesitations about the means? Would he have been better to emulate Bianchon or accept the offer of Vautrin?

12. 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 also paradoxically, 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.