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21. The Theme of Lust and Hypocrisy in Selected Short Stories of Honore de Balzac

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Abstract

Honore de Balzac is a famous French short story writer of the 19th century. He is known for his *realistic* style of writing. Through his short stories and novels he depicts contemporary social life in France. He is primarily known for his novels *The Wild Ass's Skin*, *Cesar Birotteau* and *Eugene Grandet*. However his short stories have been neglected by critics. The present paper analyses two of Balzac's early stories; they depict the lives of the poor in France. The stories show how women fell prey to the rich in the 19th century France. The theme of lust and hypocrisy is central to the short stories and Balzac shows the true face of the aristocracy through the stories. The paper is an attempt to attract readers' attention to Balzac's short stories.

Key words: Lust, Greed and Exploitation

The modern short story – *Conte* – in French literature is a 19th century phenomenon. Earlier, that is, in the medieval age and in the Renaissance period there were stories shorter in length in French literature but mostly they were didactic in nature. It is since Diderot (1743 – 1784), French writers started writing brief fiction that could be formally called 'short story'. The first *modern* short story written in French literature is by Prosper Merimee (1803 – 1870). His story "Mateo Falcone" (1829) is about a ten – year old boy who for five francs hides Sanpiero – a bandit under a haystack and when the police come denies that the bandit is hiding there. The story is remarkable for its compression and concentration of events in it. He was one of the three major short story writers in the first half of the 19th century besides Honore de Balzac (1799 – 1850) and Theophile Gautier (1811- 1872) who shaped the modern French short story. But Merimee's stories differ from Balzac's in that they probe deep into the psychology of characters rather than portraying the society around him. The stories of Merimee such as 'Mateo Falcone' can be explained better on a psychological level than sociological. Early in 1830 Balzac published his first *Contes*. Alfred G. Engstrom in his article "The Formal Short Story in France and its Development before 1850" mentions that:

Balzac's tales that approach or satisfy short story demands are not his best work; but several of them rank high in the history of the genre, and Balzac deserves a significant place among the earlier writers of the short story in France.¹

Engstrom in his article makes a case that the French short stories were developing in the beginning of the 19th century and writers like Balzac and Gautier gave shape to the modern French short stories. Gautier wrote only six short stories which are poetical in nature, portraying strong sexual desires among characters. Balzac's stories differ from those of Merimee and Gautier in themes. Balzac mainly writes about the society and people around him, giving the exact nature of the French society in his time. The present paper studies

Balzac's collection of short stories, novellas and novels, collectively entitled *La Comedie Humaine* presents a panorama of French life in the years after 1815, after the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. The stories such as "The Purse" and "The Brothers-in-Arms" can be considered examples of the French society after the fall of Napoleon. He is also acclaimed for his true-to-life narrative settings and is widely acknowledged as one of the most reliable chroniclers of the French society of his time. For his style of writing, Balzac is considered one of the founders of realism in European literature. His writing is based upon minute and accurate observation of the surrounding in which he lived. He leaves nothing to the vagaries of imagination. His characters appear so convincingly life-like which is hardly surprising since they have, in fact, lived. Marcel Girard in his introduction to Balzac's novel *The Wild Ass's Skin* (1831) rightly points out:

The student of political and social history must accept Balzac as a reliable witness. His evidence, to quote Montalembert, "though not flattering is so true". Modern historians attach great importance to the *Comedie Humaine*, for they regard it as presenting an overall picture of the truth, which is frequently accurate in detail. They remind us that after the fall of the Bourbons in 1830, the advent of a monarchy less rigid and more favourable to middle-class interests allowed free rein to liberal capitalism . . . and indeed all Balzac's work, is the story of that "gold rush".²

Critics like Peyre believe that Balzac has left us an incomparable portrait of French life in the first half of the 19th century.³ He provides more information about the position of lower middle-class France than many a professional historian or sociologist. The themes of his

writings are those of classical satire and comedy: avarice, ambition, lust, vanity and hypocrisy. For Balzac it was not love but money that made the world go round.

1. "The Maid of Thilouse"

In "The Maid of Thilouse" Balzac elucidated the shrewd calculations of a poor widow in arranging her daughter's marriage to a lord. She uses her daughter as a tool to earn materialistic comforts and in a way 'sells' her daughter to gain them. The beauty of the daughter and the great care with which the mother has brought her up remain the main criteria for the lord of Valennes to fall for her. It should be noted that the lord is ugly, ill – favoured and an old man who is fond of hunting wild animals. His hunting is not restricted to wild animals but metaphorically his hunting could be considered as hunting for women for sexual gratification. His wife could not satisfy his physical needs and hence the narrator says that the lord goes for 'hunting' maids. The proverb in the story – "there is no pot, however ugly, that does not one day find a cover" – used by the narrator to imply that every 'hunter' finds a 'prey' has covert sexual connotations. In order to preserve the chastity of her daughter the widow – a spinner – keeps a strict vigilance on her and makes her work so hard that she gets no time to look for or think about love. The narrator says, "[she] got her up in the morning, and put her to such a work that between the twain they gained about eight pennies a day".

Thus though apparently the narrator is emphasizing the shrewdness of the mother he also gives the fact that both – the mother and the daughter – worked hard and earned low wages – four pennies each day. This leads to their poverty and ultimately the beautiful daughter is used as a means to get rid of poverty. Beauty is used as a commodity, the only saleable object that the poor have. Although the story is written in a comic vein, Balzac does show the lives of the poor and their attitudes to wealth. About the mother and the daughter the narrator gives details:

But the times were just then so hard that the widow and her daughter had only bread enough to save them from dying of hunger, and as they lodged with one of their poor relations, they often wanted wood in winter and clothes in summer, owing enough rent to frighten sergeants of justice, men who are not easily frightened at the debts of others; in short, while the daughter was increasing in beauty, the mother was increasing in poverty, and ran into debt on account of her daughter's virginity, as an alchemist will for the crucible in which his all is cast.

No wonder then that the mother makes full use of her daughter's beauty to gratify her basic needs, namely food and shelter. She cannot deny the lord's offer for the daughter to be appointed as a handmaid for his wife. His intention is clear – to seduce the girl. The poor mother could not decline the offer because of her poor social and economic state. The richest and the most powerful person in the country ask for her daughter. But the shrewd widow in a series of questions and answers with the lord indirectly demands of him fagot, corn, crockery, furniture and a house in return for her daughter. Balzac's observation of the society must have made him penetrate the minds of economically weak agents in society and revealed both their attitudes and motivations that lay behind their actions. The widow appears to be shrewd and wicked for giving her beautiful daughter to an old man in return for materialistic comforts. But given the situation and circumstances she hardly has any other option; that is the only way for her to live comfortably. The mother does care for her daughter and understands the importance of being virtuous and remaining a virgin till she marries. These are the two qualities, besides her beauty, that have attracted the lord towards her. The poor spinner advises her daughter thus:

Marie Fiquet, that which is dearest to you is your honour, and there where you are going everyone, without counting my lord, will try to rob you of it, but you see well what it is worth; for that reason do not lose it save willingly and in proper manner. Now in order not to contaminate your virtue before God and before man, except for a legitimate motive, take heed that your chance of marriage be not damaged beforehand, otherwise you will go to the bad.

2 “How the Pretty Maid of Portillon Convinced Her Judge”

In “How the Pretty Maid of Portillon Convinced Her Judge” Balzac emphasizes the role of money, its objectivity and impersonality: money knows no person, no morality and ethics. It is the story of a laundress – La Portillone. Like “The Maid of Thilouse”, this story also has an intelligent maid who finally wins a huge fortune. The maid of humble origin is pretty and ‘celebrated for her merry ways and her virtue’. Most of the poor in Balzac's story are virtuous or at least appear virtuous in the beginning of the story. Balzac emphasizes the quality of being virtuous or honest in his characters in the stories and later makes fun of their ‘virtue’. When the characters lose their honour, they become hunters of wealth like La Portillone. When M. du Fou-the King's chamberlain first met the maid, he was awed by her beauty and decided to seduce her. The rich in Balzac's stories are portrayed as ‘predators of women’; they are seducers and enjoy

seducing low class women as they are socially, politically and economically weaker. Balzac, however, in this story keeps the incident of the maid's molestation dubious. Whether she gave herself up to du Fou or whether du Fou forced her is not known for sure. Balzac writes:

Some people say that he had great difficulty in forcing her to accept what he offered her, and hardly forced her at all; others that he forced her badly, because she came out like an army flagging on the route, crying and groaning, and came to the judge.

The story is satirical and through it Balzac criticizes the rich and the clergy for exploiting the poor. He depicts an age in French history where money mattered the most. Honesty and faithfulness had vanished and materialistic pleasures had gained prime importance. The pretty maid of Portillon is not a virtuous girl. When du Fou seduced her and did not give her anything – especially money – only then she turned against him and went to a judge. Thus the maid wants a 'reimbursement' for her molestation. It is worth noting that she does not ask for du Fou's arrest or request the judge to punish him by other means. What she wants is "a thousand gold crowns, because she had been *robbed* against her will". Thus the narrator's claims in the beginning of the story that the maid is honest and virtuous appear ironical. She has declined lovers such as the son of Rabelais, who had seven boats, Marchandean – the tailor and Pecarrd – a goldsmith on the ground that she wanted to marry instead of having a love relationship. Balzac's description is filled with sexual metaphors; he writes, "She made fun of them all [the son of Rabelais, Morchandean, and Peccard], because she wished to be taken to church before burthening herself with a man".

The simple reason why she asks for a thousand crowns from du Fou is to be able to live without washing. The thousand crowns would make her life comfortable and she would live without doing any hard work. Thus the motive behind her complaint is to gain the thousand crowns. For du Fou, may be, it is not a big amount but for La Portillone it certainly is. She could have sued him and asked for justice which might have resulted in legal punishment for du Fou. Hence the maid makes the case easier for the judge by asking him a thousand francs from him. What follows in the story is sheer humiliation of the maid. Although the story is written in a comic vein and in a satiric mode, the maid's exploitation is evident. The judge is not convinced that Monseigneur du Fou did anything wrong, may be the judge is cross examining her initially, getting to know the truth and the maid's point of view. Du Fou, being a senior officer in the

state, the judge tries to protect him from possible disgrace. The maid's story of her rape is taken as a joke by the judge. According to him it is the 'wench' who encouraged the Monseigneur; she surrendered herself and gave herself to the lord. She demands justice and compensation in the form of money. It seems that the interests of the judge and du Fou are interwoven. Being the lord chamberlain- a high ranked courtier – it is difficult for the judge to punish him; so he decides that it is not a case at all; how could a senior officer be charged with such a commonplace incident! The judge teases the maid and derives a kind of entertainment while cross-examining her. He is not at all serious about her complaint. When the judge asks her, "Did you take pleasure in the affair?", his humiliation of La Prillone is clear. Instead of sympathizing with her he asks ridiculous questions primarily because he sees it as a trivial matter; he implies that women like La Portillone are meant for pleasure. He continues the argument with the question that if she got pleasure with it, she will not get the amount. The maid has to convince him that she did not get any pleasure through it and hence is eligible for the fortune.

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