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The Consequences of Violating Societal Norms in *The Robbers* and *Père Goriot*

Undoubtedly when every author begins to write a novel, play or short story they believe they are setting out on a wholly original creative enterprise. But one of the great benefits of hindsight is that scholars are able to analyze the similarities that so many novels share; there seems to be a certain set of themes, ideas and issues that remain of universal interest to authors and readers throughout the course of human history. On its own this notion is not particularly contentious or interesting. However, when two works of literature appear to disagree about a shared topic, readers and scholars are given the unique opportunity to see how the values and historical influences of each respective author is reflected in his or her writing. One perfect example of this can be found by contrasting Friedrich Schiller’s play *The Robbers* with Honoré de Balzac’s novel *Père Goriot*, two drastically different stories which both happen to chronicle the multifaceted consequences of violating unethical societal norms in an unstable environment.

Although these classic literary works may share the same basic theme, the setting and historical context for each narrative inevitably informs which societal norms the author chooses to critique. Of the two writers, Schiller’s approach is slightly more vague, perhaps more interested in rebelling for the sake of rebelling rather than for a concrete political or social cause. That being said, his play does appear to have a seething disgust for the unscrupulous and often arbitrary aspects of authority; his characters regularly question firmly established societal structures which tend to breed corruption and deceit. Not only does *The Robbers* question the power of the state, but also the power of birthright as examined through the lens of primogeniture. While Balzac certainly does not shy away from similar themes of power and authority, his novel is really more an examination of the moral implications associated with social climbing. At one point a character in the novel declares, “Money is *life*” and indeed this pithy quote perfectly summarizes Balzac’s portrayal of 19th century Paris where the lifestyle of the wealthy is both appealing and treacherous in the eyes of those living in poverty (Balzac 175).  Despite their different focuses, these two important works do possess a surprising parallel which can be seen through the interaction of specific characters with societal norms. Both Karl Moor and Père Goriot defy these norms for the benefit of others despite the inherent risk involved. Conversely, both Franz Moor and Vautrin manipulate norms for purely selfish reasons without any regard for the well-being of others. Through these characters, *The Robbers* and *Père Goriot* present unique visions of social defiance and conformity and, in doing so, comments extensively on the morality of societal values in general. *The Robbers* clearly glorifies a more traditional moral code that exalts a martyr who fights for a noble cause whereas *Père Goriot* suggests that perhaps the only way to survive in a world where societal norms are morally dubious is to embrace that dubiousness by shedding the notions of honor and nobility that are so prevalent throughout Schiller’s play.

*The Robbers* is populated by nothing but morally questionable characters, so it should come as no surprise that the main character, Karl Moor, is the most conflicted and self-effacing of them all. There is a great deal not to like about Karl who is, at various points in the play, a robber, a murderer and an arsonist. Shortly after being named Captain of the Robber gang, he is forced into the unenviable predicament of having to save one of his men from hanging; his solution is to set “fire to the town in thirty-three places at once” (Schiller 81). One of his Robbers later reveals that he saw “[a] baby, lying there as right as rain under the table, and the table just about to catch fire,” but instead of saving the baby he “threw it into the flames” (Schiller 83). Karl may not be personally responsible for this heinous crime, but he is undeniably to blame for facilitating it, a fact which he acknowledges and latter bemoans. After hearing of the baby’s death he cries out, “[H]ere I renounce the impertinent plan, go to hide myself in some crevice of the earth, where the daylight shrinks before my shame” (Schiller 84). So clearly Karl still has a conscience, which at first one might find unusual for a career criminal, yet in a strange way it was his conscience that led him down the path of criminality in the first place. Despite his many faults, Karl is still an extremely honorable man who uses the Robber gang as a means of combating the corruption of power that he feels is all too prevalent in the German government. His reasoning can be best summarized in his iconic line, “The law never yet made a great man, but freedom will breed a giant, a colossus” (Schiller 36). In fact, many of Karl’s sentiments reflect anarchic ideology, particularly his belief that laws have constrained citizens and that freedom is the only antidote. The true extent of Karl’s zealotic perspective fully manifests itself in his confrontation with the Priest in act 2 where Karl mocks the Priest’s power as an authority figure and revels in exposing the many hypocrisies committed by men of the cloth whom he has murdered. He painstakingly reveals how he came to possess the rings on his fingers; one belonged to a minister of whom Karl says, “[O]rphan’s tears bore him aloft” and another belonged to a minister who “sold offices and honour to the highest bidder” (Schiller 89). This passage defines Karl’s worldview because it clarifies that, while he may be a murderer, his actions are not random and are motivated by a righteous code of honor. More importantly, Karl asks the Priest, “Can a man be so blind? He who has Argus’ hundred eyes to spy out his brother’s spots, can he be so blind to his own?” (Schiller 89). It seems that Karl is not just rebelling against unethical societal norms, but even more so against the metaphorical blindness that they inspire; ministers and priests were supposed to command respect and reverence in 18th century Germany, yet Karl seems to suggest that this reverence can incapacitate a man so much that he cannot even recognize his own innumerable of faults. Karl indisputably seems to have a point so it is unsurprising that he is cast more or less as the play’s hero, in spite of his many failings. The play fully confirms this aspect of Karl’s character in the final scene when Karl agrees to turn himself in to the law in an act strikingly reminiscent of martyrdom. The reader/audience has no real doubt that Karl is wittingly walking towards his own death, yet he willingly does so because he saw a “poor wretch” with eleven children and he believes his reward money can “help that man” (Schiller 160). This final act of selflessness erases from memory the many crimes of which Karl was previously an active participant and creates the lasting impression that he is the play’s moral center, courageously fighting against the broken structures of society in defense of those who have been abused and mistreated by those very same structures.

While the character of Père Goriot in the eponymous novel may be far less conscious of his defiance of societal norms, his actions, behaviors and beliefs are nonetheless highly indicative of a rebellious nature that is similar to Karl’s. Goriot was once a pasta-maker who “began to accumulate his fortune by selling flour” during the French Revolution, presumably by preying on the weak and starving (Balzac 60). Therefore, like Karl, his character is somewhat morally ambiguous. Regardless, after the Revolution he was wealthy enough to be considered a member of high society which allowed him to marry his daughters, Anastasie and Delphine, to rich men of their choosing. While this turn of events would appear to be ideal, in reality Goriot has spent the rest of his life making sacrifices for his eternally dissatisfied children, which is why at the beginning of the story he is essentially living in squalor at Maison Vauquer. To make matters worse, both daughters have actively distanced themselves from Goriot (at least when they are not in need of his money) because he is a self-made man and once the aristocracy returned after the Revolution, “commerce and manufacture were looked down upon” (Balzac 71). Yet this seems not to bother the former pasta-maker because he has tied his entire sense of self-worth and happiness to the well-being of his ungrateful daughters. When his backstory is finally unveiled the narrator comments, “His passionate love for his wife, defeated by death, was transferred to his two daughters, and at first they gave him all the emotional satisfaction he could want” (Balzac 70). In fact, it is this intense love for his daughters that makes Goriot an inadvertent social outsider. Goriot had the chance to live the dream that everyone else in Maison Vauquer aspires to: He was once exceedingly wealthy. And yet when he was rich he was looked down upon by high society for his humble origins just as he is now looked down upon by his fellow boarders at Maison Vauquer, presumably because his complete lack of interest in social climbing seems almost unconscionable to them. The only time in the novel where Goriot openly appears to desire wealth has nothing to do with a legitimate lust for money and instead everything to do with his longing to see his daughters before his death. As he puts it, “I’d still rather be rich, because then I’d see them” (Balzac 203). Just like Karl, Goriot’s tendency to violate societal norms stems from an essentially selfless nature in a ruthless world and, also like Karl, Goriot’s magnanimity leads to his demise. When he realizes his daughters are probably not going to come to his deathbed he laments, “I’ve done more than enough penance for loving them too much. They’ve taken right and proper vengeance for my love, they’ve torn me to pieces like executioners” (Balzac 204). Not only does he die without getting a chance to say goodbye to the only people in the world he truly cares about, but he is buried in a pauper’s grave during a funeral that his daughters also decide not to attend. And this is where the key difference between Karl and Goriot becomes most evident; both characters suffer as a result of their noble defiance of societal norms, yet Karl presumably dies dignified whereas Goriot dies unloved and forgotten.

There are, of course, two sides to every coin and if Karl represents one side then Franz Moor, his brother, must represent his darker and far more selfish antithesis. The interesting thing is that Franz, much like Karl, endlessly contemplates the unfairness of the social order that surrounds and, above all else, limits him. As mentioned earlier, his primary concern is the unfairness of primogeniture, the system which dictates that Karl will secede their father after death while Franz will ostensibly be left with nothing. Such a system is obviously unfair because it is so arbitrary, which Franz seems acutely aware of when he asks, “Why was I not the first to creep out of my mother’s womb?” (Schiller 33). Franz takes these musings even further and provocatively asks why children should be grateful to their parents for giving birth to them if their lives have been unfair and miserable, like Franz’s has. Of his father he asks, “Can I feel any gratitude to him for my being a man?” (Schiller 34). All of Franz’s ideas are philosophically engaging and merit serious further consideration, but *The Robbers* nonetheless paints him as a stereotypical villain simply because his motivations are entirely selfish. Unlike his brother, Franz never actually bothers to rebel against societal norms, he merely questions them and then realizes how he can use them to his advantage. For instance, he uses the rules of primogeniture against his family when he attempts to disinherit his brother and kill his father so that he can become the next Count Moor. Schiller draws another interesting parallel between the two brothers near the end of the play when Franz meets with Pastor Moser shortly before his impending death in a scene that is highly evocative of Karl’s meeting with the Priest. During his confrontation with the Priest, Karl displayed a powerful confidence in his convictions about corruption in religious institutions. Likewise, Franz also begins with the same sense of conviction, insisting in no uncertain terms, “There is no God! - Now I am talking to you in earnest, I tell you, there is none!” (Schiller 144). Unlike his brother, though, Franz eventually adopts the societal norms surrounding religion in the ridiculous hope that God will forgive him for his crimes before he dies (Schiller 149). Unsurprisingly, self-serving behavior, lust for power and dishonest adoption of Christian principles all lead Franz to take his own life and, as a result, he is remembered at the end of the tale as little more than a cruel aspiring tyrant unworthy of the audience’s sympathy.

Vautrin is to Goriot what Franz is to Karl. Monsieur Vautrin is a scoundrel, criminal, smooth-talker and one of the most despicable yet fascinating characters in all of literature, providing a surprising layer of moral depth to *Père Goriot*. The driving force of the novel’s plot is law student Eugène de Rastignac’s aspiration to become a member of high society, preferably through an advantageous marriage or a mistress. Despite the book’s title, Rastignac is really the audience surrogate character because it is through his eyes that the reader learns of the duplicitous nature of Paris’s upper class; hidden beneath a series of meaningless social norms lies a very different set of social norms that accepts and sometimes even requires members of the upper class to be deceitful, manipulative, Machiavellian and cruel for the sake of maintaining their high status facade. Rastignac is told early on by his cousin, Madame de Beauséant, that to succeed in high society he must “[s]trike without pity, and…Think of men and women simply as post-horses to be discarded in a ditch” (Balzac 62). It is for this reason that Vautrin is so compelling; he is, in many respects, a parody of high society’s darkest impulses and thoroughly demonstrates the rampant hypocrisy that exists beneath the civilized surface. For example, Vautrin tempts Rastignac by presenting a foolproof plan for the law student to make his way in high society; Rastignac will marry Mademoiselle Victorine Taillefer and Vautrin will arrange for the murder of Victorine’s brother so that she will inherit her father’s considerable fortune. In return, Vautrin will receive a percentage of the dowry so that he can flee to America and become a slave owner. Vautrin’s goal is ultimately to live the same luxurious lifestyle as the aristocracy, the only difference is that Vautrin makes no effort to temper his manipulative and dangerous schemes. He tells Rastignac, “Honesty will get you nowhere” and “Life’s no prettier than a kitchen, it stinks just as bad, and if you want to get anything done you have to get your hands dirty” (Balzac 86). Much like Franz, Vautrin accepts the norms of high society and takes them to their logical conclusion; in his mind, if one is willing to be deceitful for personal gain then one has no excuse to be squeamish about murder if the objective is the same. At the end of the novel it is even strongly suggested that Vautrin might not be wrong. When Goriot dies, Rastignac does not return to his former provincial life but instead turns to Paris and announces, “Now it’s just the two of us! - I’m ready!” (Balzac 217). As it turns out, his next plan is to dine with Goriot’s daughter, Delphine, who is an active participant in this vicious social order due to her failure to attend her father’s deathbed and funeral. It is almost as if Rastignac had to experience the tragedy of Père Goriot to accept the sinfulness of high society, but rather than turn his back he accepts Vautrin’s philosophy with a smile and a grin and plunges forward without any more moral inhibitions.

Literature has always served a variety of social, cultural and political functions; sometimes novels are mere entertainment, sometimes they are educational and sometimes they have a message. But often the most interesting are the stories like *The Robbers* and *Père Goriot*, narratives filled with ambiguity because their underlying intent is to hold a mirror up to society and demand that the reader confront the truth and decide what is right and what is wrong. On that note, though, the two works interpret the decisions and internal philosophies of their characters very differently. Schiller, one might argue, comes across as more of an idealist, presenting Karl as a Christ-like martyr and Franz as both literally and figuratively a deformed monster (Schiller 33). Balzac, conversely, is much more of a realist. He even declares at the beginning, “[T]his drama is not fictional, it’s not a novel. *All is true*” (Balzac 6). This is, of course, a lie but it is worth noting that in his version of “the truth” the most honorable character dies forgotten and a philosophy that promotes selfish manipulation and undisguised treachery is given credence through Rastignac’s final declaration. In other words, the worldview presented by *The Robbers* is far more comforting while *Père Goriot*’s feels more honest; one suggests that good men can triumph while the other suggests that to swim with the sharks one must become even worse than the sharks. To decide which narrative’s perspective is better is thoroughly counterproductive. That is a decision that must be left to each reader individually because that is ultimately the purpose of literature: To allow oneself to be exposed to a myriad of differing perspectives and reshape one’s worldview accordingly.

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