

# The Image of Money In 19th-Century France: An Economic and Monetary Philosophy Perspective on *PÈRe Goriot*

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes Balzac's classic novel *Le Père Goriot*, exploring how money alienates human nature and its effects on individuals and society within the context of capitalist systems. It begins by examining the rise of capitalism in 19th-century France, highlighting how the capitalist system fostered social division and widened the gap between rich and poor. Then, it delves into the character of Père Goriot, portraying him as both a ruthless businessman and an overly indulgent father, revealing how money distorts his love to his daughters, creating a conflict between feudalism and capitalism. Finally, the study discusses how the rise of materialism and the worship of money led to the erosion of spiritual values and the loss of a messianic (savior) consciousness. It concludes that in a society lacking shared ideals and faith, money becomes deified, resulting in the degradation of human nature and the tragic collapse of familial bonds.

**Keywords:** Capitalism; *Le Père Goriot*; economy; philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

As one of the greatest realist writers of 19th-century France, a pioneer and a leading figure of European critical realism, Balzac's works have been hailed as a "mirror of French society." At the time when Balzac passed away, at Balzac's funeral, Victor Hugo delivered a passionate and moving eulogy in front of thousands of mourners and audiences, proclaiming, "Among the greatest figures, Balzac stands at the forefront; among the best personages, he is the finest" in the drizzling rain in Paris [1]. Over a hundred years has passed, and his works have spread worldwide, significantly influencing the development of global literature and human progress. Karl Marx praised Balzac's novels as "novel that surpassed all of the same kind".

It is breathtaking to investigate and enjoy the details in Balzac's works: whether analogies characters to animals or meticulously portraying the streets and alleys of Paris, even 21st-century readers can catch a glimpse of 19th-century French society, marked by the decline of the feudal aristocracy, the rise of capitalism, and the myriad human conditions shaped by the times. Balzac's early struggles in his entrepreneurial endeavors, full of twists and turns, including interning at a law firm and setting up a printing plant has given him a profound understanding of the workings of capitalist society and the inherent greed of humanity, all of which are vividly reflected in his writings. This article utilizes monetary economics, ethics, and Marxist value theory to analyze and critique the capitalist obsession with money, particularly from a literary perspective.

## 2. The Capitalist Predicament Reflected in *Père Goriot*

### 2.1. From the Rise of the Bourgeoisie to the Socioeconomic Transformation of 19th-Century France

Since the French Revolution, the French bourgeoisie had won significant victories and ascended to the historical stage. Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, England, advocated for a free market economy, emphasizing the role of market mechanisms in resource allocation and opposing excessive government intervention in economic activities [2]. These ideas gradually gained acceptance in 19th-century France, especially during the July Monarchy and the Second Republic, when economic liberalism became a key principle in policy making [3].

Following the revolution, the French government's strained and limited finances prompted them to favor the bourgeoisie and encouraged the emerge of free market. Those who amassed great wealth after the revolution became factory owners, financiers, and professionals. The land tax-based electoral system gave them overwhelming influence, enabling more of them to enter the upper echelons of government [4]. These ambitious individuals, seeking to protect their interests, enacted a series of laws safeguarding private property and legitimized their ventures by presenting them as respectable, using legal means to embark on a frenzied pursuit of wealth [5]. In *Père Goriot*, Old Goriot rose to fortune by exploiting legal loopholes, buying low and selling high in the flour business.

Marx once remarked, "Capital, from its very inception, drips with blood and dirt from every pore" [6]. Capitalism is a social system where capitalists own the means of production and exploit wage labor. In their relentless pursuit of profit, capitalists extract surplus value from labor through employment relations. The bourgeoisie is a class driven by the pursuit of monetary gain, seeking every possible means to amass wealth since its inception. The bourgeoisie, borrowing directly from the law, declared private property sacred and inviolable, which immediately spurred a mad rush for wealth.

However, the notion of the inviolability of private property serves only to protect the production means of a select group of vested interests. Old Goriot, for example, colluded with local power players, profiting during turbulent times by selling grain at exorbitant prices, thereby making his first fortune and continuing to exploit legal loopholes to amass wealth. During an era when the common people scrambled for bread, some individuals, like Goriot, were still able to procure premium food products from general stores.

In France, especially in Paris, society was split into two groups based on wealth: the rich and the poor. The widening gap between rich and poor created a peculiar landscape in French society, where, on one side, capitalists indulged in luxurious pleasures, while on the other, the poor endured grim, mud-stained lives, separated from their families. In Balzac's view, France was a place where wealth and poverty were tightly intertwined, particularly in Paris, a city he knew well. Wealth, for Balzac, was the direct cause of poverty—because the affluence of a few led to the impoverishment of the masses.

## **2.2. The Alienation of Humanity through Money: An Analysis of Old Goriot's Character**

Old Goriot, the central figure of the novel, embodies both paternal love and miserly selfishness. Balzac brilliantly combined these two traits in a single character. Undoubtedly, Goriot is a successful businessman, with a keen sense for the flour business and a remarkable talent for anticipating market trends. He could discern quality, predict market dynamics, and even forecast the coming year's harvest. He also mastered the art of surviving in a capitalist market: forging ties with officials; lying hiding himself and pretending to be modest in front of others; and making a fortune off the hard-earned money of ordinary people that purchased his flour and pasta [7]. He ruthlessly extracted grain money from one impoverished family after another in the pasta industry. While amassing wealth, he maintained his frugal habits: simple soup and vegetables has been and would be forever his best and most typical dinner. He spent very little on himself as well. He was even unwilling to choose the best room to live to save money. The idea of spending money on others was unthinkable.

However, the same cold-hearted businessman and miser poured immense material wealth into his daughters. After losing his wife in middle age, Goriot directed all his love towards his daughters. His love for them is noble, yet idealized, which is undoubtable. Balzac, who suffered from a lack of affection in his childhood due to his parents' stinginess and greed, carried these wounds throughout his life. His experiences shaped his later works, such as *Père Goriot* and *Eugénie Grandet*, where he boldly and unapologetically exposed the relationship between money and familial love within bourgeois families.

Despite his idealized affection for his daughters, Goriot's love ultimately failed: it was driven more by personal will and preference than responsibility, and thus lacked moral value [8]. In an era where capitalism had shattered the sentimental façade of family bonds, Goriot clung to his idealized, feudal,

patriarchal father-daughter relationship, only to be driven to death by his two daughters, who symbolized the march of time. This tragedy reflects not only the sorrow of familial affection and decaying feudal morals but also the tragic consequences of capitalist materialism.

When it comes to money, Goriot is both selfish and generous. This duality is a result of the distortion and alienation caused by money. According to Georg Simmel, for modern individuals mired in the “fetishism of money,” their values become distorted by money through the behaviors and attitudes associated with greed, miserliness, luxury, and asceticism. Greedy individuals, misers, spendthrifts, and ascetics (the poor) are ideal character types associated with these monetary behaviors [9]. In Goriot, we see the coexistence of greed, miserliness, and luxury, which not only enriches his character but also brings complexity. Noted by Aristotle, spendthrifts give without considering time or manner [10]. Goriot’s failed parenting vividly illustrates this flaw: his reckless and unregulated indulgence in spending on his daughters ultimately fostered their ingratitude and led to his downfall.

Goriot’s unbounded spoiling of his daughters reflects the crisis of emptiness that comes with possessing immense wealth. Freedom does not always mean the proactive acquisition of something, and freedom without meaning is hollow [11]. Whether an individual can proactively “gain something” through freedom largely depends on their value beliefs. When a mature monetary economy severs the traditional, organic ties between individuals and their communities or society, leaving only abstract functional or utilitarian relationships, on the one hand, it grants individuals the “freedom” to escape constraints [12].

On the other hand, it dissolves shared ideals and collective spirit (such as common religious beliefs), depleting the traditional sources from which individuals derive their values. At the same time, money, as essentially a means, cannot provide individuals with true positive value or meaning [13]. Goriot’s unconditional love for his daughters was an attempt to replenish his traditional source of value beliefs. However, the “freedom” he gained through the possession of money was only a hollow form, lacking the content that could enrich the individual. This is why Goriot’s love was so limited and foolish. The very method he used—money—was what had rendered him empty in the first place. This crisis became an unbreakable deadlock, a cultural tragedy.

### **2.3. The Fetishism of Money: The Messiah’s Absence and the Deification of Wealth**

When money brings negative effects to individuals and society, both humanity and divinity vanish. After the French Revolution, the Church was weakened. Its properties were confiscated, and clergy were elected, receiving salaries from the state. On November 7, 1793, Paris Bishop Gobel, under pressure, resigned and publicly renounced his religious faith. By the end of November that same year, all churches in Paris were closed. The Revolution not only destroyed the oppressive rule of the Church but also exposed the corruption and malfeasance of the clergy. The collapse of the Church symbolized the loss of the Messiah for this era, followed by the disappearance of humanity.

In Père Goriot, there are no scenes of religious worship or prayer, foreshadowing the rise of money as the new deity. As early as the Jin Dynasty, Lu Bao’s Discussion About How Money Becomes God posited that “life and death are not determined by fate; being wealthy or not is determined by one’s capital.” Money, as the alienated form of all things, gained divine power through the market to transform everything. Just as “heaven has its limits, but money is boundless” [14], the condition of becoming a perfect human is defined solely by wealth. The power of money surpasses that of the heavens, becoming the supreme god of the universe.

## **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper discusses the influence of money under the background of social change in France during the nineteenth century. When capitalism expanded and past ethics along with the authority of religion being destroyed, people were chasing for wealth and leaving old morality behind. While capitalism creating expanding values to the society, it also diminished lots of values that were

once precious to human beings. Money is the media in this process. Balzac realized this problem in his society and determined to disclose it to his readers.

Even though readers believe the society has been distorted, only literal works could express the real voice and problems at that time. Money not only demystifies the world, but also degrades and erodes the individual. In this godless era, when “all that is sacred is profaned, and all that is solid melts into air,” individuals face not only the oppression and erosion of the objective world but also the nihilism of the spiritual world. Balzac vividly portrayed the various lives of 19th-century French residents—whether in pain, numbness, or greed. He resisted nihilism but refused to sacrifice reason, continuously calling upon humanity’s conscience.

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