

Cousin Bette by Honoré de Balzac

By Nicola

Written in 1846, *Cousin Bette* is a contemporary portrait of the social and cultural life of Paris but for me it is a social history lesson of a formative time in France with the demise of the Napoleonic Empire and the rise of the bourgeoisie brought to life through the events and fully formed characters of this drama.

Balzac's extensive use of detail, especially the detail of objects, to illustrate the lives of his characters made him an early pioneer of literary realism. He depicted human existence through the use of particulars. Paris is so closely described in *Cousin Bette* that it is virtually a character in its own right.

Balzac sought to present his characters as real people, neither fully good nor fully evil, but fully human. "Balzac's characters", Robb notes, "were as real to him as if he were observing them in the outside world." At the same time, the characters represent a particular range of social types: the noble soldier, the scoundrel, the proud workman, the fearless spy, the alluring mistress. That Balzac was able to balance the strength of the individual against the representation of the type is evidence of the author's skill.

In *Cousin Bette*, the characters represent polarities of contrasting morality. The vengeful Bette and disingenuous Valérie stand on one side, with the merciful Adeline and her patient daughter Hortense on the other. The patriarch of the Hulot family, meanwhile, is consumed by his own sexual desire. Hortense's husband, the Polish exile Wenceslas Steinbock, represents artistic genius, though he succumbs to uncertainty and lack of motivation.

Balzac was a highly conservative Royalist but with some very progressive ideas and keen insight regarding working-class conditions. He comments on the social and political situation of the day and is critical of the acquisitive motivation of the women and the weakness of the men.

The central character of Bette is constantly described using animal terms and I quickly got a visual picture of her as a dark, thin, 'simian faced', sour, middle aged woman with considerable force of character but impotent in terms of social standing. I recognized an undercurrent of sexual desire and/or jealousy between Bette and other women. Balzac based the character of Bette in part on his mother.

A nearly infinite reserve of energy propels the characters in Balzac's novels. Struggling against the currents of human nature and society, they may lose more often than they win — but only rarely do they give up.

Balzac makes periodic interruptions to explain to the reader the structure of the novel and some of the background plot. The first third of the novel provides a lengthy exploration of the characters' histories. Balzac makes

this clear after 150 pages: "Here ends what is, in a way, the introduction to this story." At page 164 he explains "This retrospective account, very necessary when people are met again after a three years' interval, shows Valerie's balance-sheet. Now that of her associate, Lisbeth, must be considered."

Balzac was 45 yo at the time of writing (he lived to 51yo). He had already written 70 novels, plus novellas and plays. He was a well respected writer although he had attempted - always unsuccessfully - a range of business ventures from publishing to timber merchant. He wrote slowly but with dogged discipline and generated an enormous volume of work - probably because he was always financially constrained. He was often unwell and did not live flamboyantly although he describes Parisienne society life of clubs and mistresses in great detail.

Balzac is considered a master of the realism style of novel - which at the time was quite a new form of literature. His contemporaries were writing serials but Balzac was scornful of this form and wanted to prove the superiority of the novel as a literary form. *Cousin Bette* was written in 2 months and is one of the last novels by Balzac as a mature writer in a novel sequence *La Comédie humaine* ("The Human Comedy").

Interestingly, while he usually drafted and redrafted work, *Cousin Bette* was written in 2 months and without redrafting. He sent the chapters to the publisher as he completed each of them.

Balzac influenced the writers of his time and beyond. He has been compared to Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy and is sited as one of their influences. Zola, Flaubert, Proust and Henry James are all in his debt. In Balzac's vision of society, class, money and personal ambition are the major players and with the GFC, Occupy Wall Street and other current events, I'd have to say he may be right.