

Cousin Bette: Part One of Poor Relations Study Guide

Cousin Bette: Part One of Poor Relations by Honoré de Balzac

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Cousin Bette: Part One of Poor Relations Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 5 - 148.....	4
Pages 149 - 286.....	10
Pages 287 to 437.....	16
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	30
Themes.....	33
Style.....	36
Quotes.....	39
Topics for Discussion.....	41



Plot Summary

Cousin Bette by Honoré de Balzac is more the story of an entire family rather than that of one person. Lisbeth Fischer, known to her family and friends as Bette, has harbored a resentment against her cousin Adeline Hulot since childhood. Bette's father and Adeline's father were two of the Fischer brothers. Their uncle, Johann Fischer, brought the girls up and still contributes to their financial well-being as adults. Adeline and her cousin Bette are exact opposites. Adeline is fair-haired and of light complexion while Bette is dark and rather ugly. Bette sees Adeline as the enemy because of her beauty and good fortune in life. Adeline is married to Baron Hulot, a successful government employee and one-time benefactor to the Fischer brothers. After Bette moves to Paris at Adeline's insistence, she hatches a plot to destroy the beautiful Adeline, her husband and their children.

Bette is neighbors with Valérie Marneffe and her husband, a civil servant and one of Hector Hulot's subordinates in the War Office. Bette also provides for the care and upkeep of Count Wenceslas Steinbock, a Polish refugee and talented artist who lives in the garret above her. It just so happens that Steinbock lives as Bette Fischer's protege until Steinbock meets and marries Hortense Hulot. In the meantime, it is revealed that Baron Hulot's family is on the threshold of financial and social ruin because of his countless affairs with women. Bette uses Hector's weakness against him when she facilitates an affair between him and Valérie Marneffe. Another associate of the Fischer-Hulot family, Monsieur Célestin Crevel, competes with Baron Hulot in a treacherous game involving mistresses. Crevel and Hulot are in-laws, as Hulot's son Victorin is married to Crevel's daughter Célestine. Monsieur Crevel's visit to Adeline Hulot is what sets the plot of the novel in motion.

Cousin Bette and many of the primary protagonists in the novel are afflicted with the vices of greed, envy, and lust. Bette's greed seeks to overthrow Adeline Hulot. Madame Marneffe's greed and lust are only satisfied by acquiring wealth and material possessions. Baron Hulot's lust carries him from one affair to the next and his greed deepens his financial trouble each time. Crevel's greed motivates him to "steal" a mistress from Hector Hulot only to have it cost him his life. The morals and standards of nineteenth century French society come under the author's scrutiny in Cousin Bette. The novel is also a critique of the concept of a French ruling class after the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte. Balzac's novel is also a morality play in that the characters are imaginative figures as well as character types. And while the story in and of itself is tidily resolved, the narrative nonetheless exposes an underside of human behavior that is puzzling at best and deadly at worst.



Pages 5 - 148

Pages 5 - 148 Summary

The action of Honoré de Balzac's novel follows the nineteenth-century Parisian lives of Bette Fischer, her cousin Adeline Hulot and Adeline's husband Baron Hector Hulot. Cousin Bette is the story of a woman with a jealous heart and a devious mind. A poor relation of the Adeline (Fischer) Hulot family, Bette is consumed with a wish to see Adeline brought down from her pedestal of perfection. Her desire for the ruination of the entire Hulot clan causes Bette to form advantageous associations with people from several social strata. Mademoiselle Fischer manages to keep company with those who believe in using money and power for revenge. She fails to realize, though, that certain individuals are far more dangerous to one's health than others. Bette's plan to destroy her cousin Adeline relies significantly on Bette's friendship with the poisonous Madame Marneffe and Marneffe's eventual husband, the former merchant, Monsieur Crevel. Hector Hulot plays into Bette Fischer's hands by way of his flagrant affairs with a series of young women and girls. The Hulots do topple as Bette watches but their poor fortune is only temporary. Bette Fischer's torment, however, is more permanent.

While Hortense and Bette sit in the summer house laughing and talking, Monsieur Célestin Crevel pays a call on Baroness Adeline Hulot. Crevel is a close friend of Baron Hector Hulot and his family. Adeline's son Victorin is married to Crevel's daughter. Upon entering the sitting room, Monsieur Crevel notices the shabby condition of Baron Hulot's house. The tables and chairs are out of fashion. The rugs and tapestries which decorate the room are worn and the colors have faded. Baroness Hulot seems unaware of her lackluster surroundings. On this particular day, Monsieur Crevel has come to speak to Adeline about the finances of his daughter, Célestine. It seems that Célestine's hefty dowry of 500,000 francs is quickly dwindling because Victorin Hulot is running up debt and is not earning enough money to support himself and his new wife. Monsieur Crevel has also taken it upon himself to act as unofficial matchmaker for Hortense, Adeline's only daughter. However, since no one has stepped forward and asked for Hortense's hand, Baroness Hulot believes that Crevel is simply getting in the way. Adeline calls Crevel to task for dragging his feet in the search for a spouse for Hortense. Baron Hulot and his wife are supposedly offering a dowry of 200,000 francs for Hortense. Crevel speaks candidly to Adeline, explaining the hesitation in his efforts to find a suitable marriage prospect for Hortense.

Célestin Crevel tells Adeline Hulot that at the age of 15, a young opera singer named Josépha Mariah became Célestin Crevel's mistress. Similarly, at around the same time, Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy also kept a mistress. A young woman named Jenny Cadine, an aspiring actress, was being generously supported by Baron Hulot. However, Jenny Cadine was also an opportunist and her eye began to wander. She sought out wealthier, younger men who were willing to spend more money on her than Hector. When Jenny Cadine threw the Baron over for various other lovers, Hulot seduced Josépha Mariah away from Crevel. Crevel, resentful of the Baron's lack of regard for their friendship in



the matter of Josépha, admits to Adeline that he tells Hortense's possible suitors the Hulots cannot be trusted. Baron Hulot, Crevel tells Adeline, spends all of his money on his mistresses which accounts for her family's financial troubles. Furthermore, Adeline learns that Josépha (her husband's present mistress) is currently being courted by the Duke d'Hérouville, an extremely wealthy nobleman. Crevel, determined to take his revenge on Baron Hulot, makes Adeline a proposition. If Adeline will be his mistress for ten years, Crevel promises to give Adeline 20,000 francs a year. Adeline vehemently refuses Crevel's offer. Adeline knew about Hector's involvement with Jenny Cadine all along but before Crevel's visit, she knew nothing of Josépha.

The narrative then turns to Adeline and her beginnings. Baroness Adeline (Fischer) Hulot was born in Lorraine, in the country, and raised by her uncle Pierre. Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy helped Adeline's father and her two uncles advance by giving them government contracts. The Fischer brothers improve their personal fortunes with Hector Hulot's assistance and Hector marries the beautiful Adeline "as quickly as the law would permit" (27). In the beginning, Hulot is faithful to Adeline and the two of them are very much in love. When Hector is made a baron, their wealth increases significantly. Hector makes a name for himself in the War Office and it seems that their life together will be successful and happy. One evening, though, Adeline sees Hector at the theater with Jenny Cadine. Since that evening, Adeline Hulot ignores her husband's indiscretions, choosing not to confront him. She tells herself that she is above the petty jealousies of other wives and that her duty is to be a supportive, loving partner to Hector. Adeline reminds herself repeatedly that Hector loves her and that one day the two of them will be reconciled. Nevertheless, Adeline is somewhat shaken by Monsieur Crevel's disturbing news. She has had suspicions about the decline in her family's finances but Adeline had no idea as to the truth depth of Hector's dishonesty. Adeline does not know that her son Victorin's marriage to Monsieur Crevel's daughter is the work of Josépha Mariah and Jenny Cadine.

On the day that Monsieur Crevel visits Adeline Hulot with his proposition, Cousin Bette tells Hortense that she has a lover named Wenceslas Steinbock. Bette claims that Wenceslas is a Polish Count who has fled from his home country to begin a new life in Paris. At first, Hortense laughs, never believing any man would find her mother's eccentric country cousin attractive. Hortense promises to give Bette a yellow cashmere shawl if Bette can prove that Wenceslas really exists. To that end, Bette shows Hortense a silver seal, beautifully crafted, depicting Faith, Hope, and Charity. The seal is a fine piece of work, and it is obvious to Hortense that the artist who created it is an individual of some talent. Bette claims that Wenceslas Steinbock designed and made the seal. She then tells Hortense that the seal is to be Adeline's birthday present. Bette then tells Hortense that if Baron Hulot were to buy one of Wenceslas's bronze pieces and convince his wealthy colleagues to do the same, Wenceslas could eventually become a wealthy artist. Hortense promises Bette that she will talk to the Baron and convinces Bette to leave the silver seal with her.

The narrative then explains how Bette Fischer and Count Wenceslas Steinbock first meet. One night when she is working late, Bette smells gas coming from the garret above her rooms. She rushes upstairs and discovers that Wenceslas is trying to commit



suicide by leaving the gas on. Bette rescues Wenceslas and becomes his benefactress and his jailer. Bette, seeing that Wenceslas is a young man with artistic talent, uses her meager financial resources to take care of Wenceslas, in hopes of cashing in on his fame one day. Bette feeds and clothes Wenceslas who, while he is talented, is also very lazy. Bette tries to see to it that Wenceslas remains on task, sketching, designing, producing. The young count is grateful to Bette for helping him but Wenceslas feels oppressed by her. Bette's jealousy and insecurity keep her from allowing Wenceslas any freedom. She monitors his comings and goings, constantly reminding Wenceslas of his debt to her generosity. Secretly, Bette is in love with Wenceslas but realizes that Wenceslas could never be in love with her. Bette is by turns cruel and kind. She berates Wenceslas, abusing the young man verbally and then apologizing tearfully for mistreating him. Bette never misses an opportunity to remind the young man of all she has done for him. Wenceslas is something of an indentured servant.

The linear narrative resumes after Crevel leaves Baron Hulot's house. Moments later, Hector Hulot, crying all the while, admits the affair with Josépha Mariah. He also informs his wife Adeline that he is unable to repay 25,000 francs he recently borrowed from Adeline's uncle Johann Fischer. Since he spends so much of his family's money on his affairs with women, Hulot has been borrowing money from anyone who will lend it to him. Adeline forgives Hector for behaving so irresponsibly even though the family is in financial ruin because of Hector's numerous infidelities. When he escorts Bette home later that evening, Hector Hulot sees Valérie Marneffe for the first time and is immediately smitten with her. Madame Marneffe and her husband live in the same building as Bette Fischer. Hulot then goes to the opera, hoping to rendezvous with Josépha Miriah but when he arrives, the opera is closed. Hulot then visits Josépha at her home, only to discover that she has recently moved into a house supposedly purchased for her by the Duke d'Hérouville, her new lover. Returning home dejected, Hulot tells Adeline that Josépha has thrown him over for the duke. Adeline suggests that her husband find a less expensive mistress.

The next morning, Hortense and Baron Hulot walk to the Place du Carrousel to do some window shopping. It is at this point that Hulot once again sees Valérie Marneffe and decides to make her his new mistress, figuring she will cost less to maintain than Josépha Mariah. Madame Marneffe recognizes Baron Hulot as her husband's supervisor and lets him know, in a roundabout way, that Hulot controls her husband's professional fate. Madame Marneffe complains that her husband has been waiting for a promotion for quite some time. After his conversation with the lovely Madame Marneffe, the Baron joins Hortense in an antique shop as she admires some of Wenceslas Steinbock's work. Hortense purchases one of Wenceslas's bronze pieces and asks the art dealer to bring the piece and the artist to her home in order to discuss "some important commissions" (85). Wenceslas, who is sitting in the shop watching all of this, falls in love with Hortense at first sight. On the way home, Hortense tells Baron Hulot that she has found a husband. Wenceslas and the art dealer visit Hortense and Baron Hulot later that afternoon as requested. Hulot is impressed with the young man. Hortense informs Adeline that she plans to marry Wenceslas Steinbock. Adeline is both apprehensive and excited to witness Hortense's confidence in choosing Wenceslas, but



Adeline cautions Hortense to tread lightly around Cousin Bette. After all, Hortense and Adeline both believe that Hortense has stolen Bette's lover.

Upon returning home to his small garret, Wenceslas lies to Bette, telling her that he has finally sold one of his bronze pieces. Furthermore, Wenceslas is pleased to inform Bette that it was the Duke d'Hérouville who bought the piece. Much to Bette's surprise, Baron Hulot (her cousin Adeline's husband) pays a call on her at home shortly thereafter. No one in the Hulot family had ever visited Bette in her rooms. After all, Bette lives in a rather rundown part of Paris. Hulot visits Bette in the hopes of once again encountering the intriguing Madame Valérie Marneffe. Soon after the Baron's arrival, Madame Marneffe also comes to Bette's rooms. Madame Marneffe flirts and plays coy with Baron Hulot, but promises him nothing that day. Hulot, however, quickly arranges for Valérie's husband Monsieur Marneffe to receive a promotion and a vacation. Monsieur Marneffe soon leaves Paris for a two-week holiday in Switzerland. While Marneffe is out of town, Baron Hulot begins courting Valérie Marneffe. He takes Madame Marneffe to fine restaurants and gives her expensive gifts. Baron Hulot also promises to set Valérie Marneffe up in a house of her own in the fashionable Rue Vanneau. With his attention focused squarely on his new female conquest, Baron Hulot embarks on another affair. He is intent on putting the shameful incident involving Josépha Mariah behind him.

In the meantime, Wenceslas's art has begun to sell and he becomes quite well-known in Paris. Hortense and Wenceslas arrange to marry. When Valérie Marneffe tells Bette that Hortense and Wenceslas are engaged, Bette vows to bring about the undoing of Adeline and her entire family. Bette then goes to Monsieur Rivet and learns of a way to have Wenceslas imprisoned for failing to pay a promissory note for money she spent helping Wenceslas get on his feet. Afterward, Bette goes to Monsieur Crevel's home for dinner. Bette gleefully informs Crevel that Josépha has left Baron Hulot for the Duke d'Hérouville and while the news pleases Crevel, he is nonetheless determined to take his revenge on Hector Hulot. Monsieur Crevel mistakenly believes that Bette had a hand in bringing Hortense Hulot and Count Wenceslas Steinbock together.

Early the following morning, Wenceslas is taken to jail and Bette goes to her cousin Adeline's house for a visit. Adeline tells Bette that Wenceslas and Hortense are to be married. Bette plays along. She then tells Hortense and Adeline that Wenceslas has gone to be with his wife in Russia. Hortense and her mother are shocked to hear that Wenceslas is already married. Just at that moment, Wenceslas arrives at the Hulot home. Baron Hulot tells Wenceslas that rather than providing a cash dowry for Hortense, Hulot will see to it that Wenceslas receives commissions for his artwork totaling 200,000 francs. Hulot also promises to give Wenceslas a bond in the amount of 60,000 francs (out of which will come a small annuity for Bette).

Hector Hulot's determination to provide lavishly for his new mistress, Valérie Marneffe, prompts the Baron to scramble for money. First, he convinces Johann Fischer (his wife's uncle) to sell his business to one of Hulot's War Office associates for 10,000 francs. He then talks Fischer into relocating to Algiers (in northern Africa) in order to work for the Commissariat, buying corn and other goods on behalf of the French government. Hulot tells Johann Fischer that there is a great deal of money to be made. Hulot plans to skim



the profits in order to raise funds for his maintenance of Madame Marneffe. Hulot is on the verge of financial ruin and through a series of shady business deals, he manages to raise the money needed for Hortense's trousseau. Having fallen desperately in love with Valérie Marneffe, Hector Hulot decides to leave Adeline. He tells Adeline that he will retire in three years and that they will need to scale back. Hortense Hulot and Count Wenceslas Steinbock are to be married on the same day that Valérie Marneffe is to move into her new home on the Rue Vanneau.

Pages 5 - 148 Analysis

The reader is immediately introduced to two of the main protagonists of the narrative. Baroness Adeline Hulot is represented by her shabby furniture and faded surroundings as someone who is out of touch with fashion and therefore out of step with life in the city of Paris. It also implies that the Baroness lives in a kind of denial that is manifest in the deterioration of those things in her immediate vicinity. Also, the worn and fading furnishings speak volumes about the Hulot family's financial position. Célestin Crevel immediately senses that something is amiss. The Hulot family had long been a wealthy and prosperous one. To see that they have sunk so low is both alarming and delightful to Crevel.

Crevel, on the other hand, enjoys a life of relative ease. There is something of self-sacrifice in Crevel's personality, however. His choice to keep a string of mistresses rather than take a wife reveals that Crevel's most immediate concerns revolve around money and its distribution before and after death. He is right to want his daughter to inherit his wealth outright, without the input or interference of a woman who is not Célestine's mother. Crevel is a wealthy man, but he is not above petty feelings of hurt and insecurity. In this case, Crevel uses his daughter's diminishing dowry as an excuse to visit Adeline Hulot and take her down a peg by chronicling Hector Hulot's sins against matrimony.

The reader also becomes aware of a reality of nineteenth-century life: namely, the arrangement of marriages. Crevel goes to Adeline to complain, it is true. It is also true that Crevel takes some measure of pride in explaining his actions to Adeline. He wishes the Baroness to know the truth about Hector's doings. He also wants Adeline to know the impact of Hector's behavior on Hortense's chance for a suitable match. Moreover, Crevel wants to hurt Adeline with the information about Hector. Proposing that Adeline become his mistress proves that Crevel appreciates the thrill of humiliating another human being. What Crevel does not yet understand is that Adeline Hulot is no ordinary woman or wife. Crevel attempts to debase Adeline with his offer to pay her for her time but this tactic backfires when Adeline refuses out of a sense of propriety. Crevel learns that, unlike the other women in his life, Adeline Hulot has innate principles and morals which keep her from compromising herself and her family.

The brief discussion of Adeline's personal background lays the foundation for understanding Bette's absolute hatred of her cousin. Bette begins the narrative an ugly, brutish and unhappy figure. She is not the natural beauty that Adeline is, which has



never ceased to anger Bette. Part of Bette's jealousy has to do with being unmarried. Bette is portrayed as sneaky and conniving in her arrangement with Wenceslas Steinbock. In her interactions with Hortense, though, Bette sometimes behaves unselfishly. These moments of altruism do not last long and Bette's focus shifts back to her main goal to destroy Adeline. Bette's relationship with Steinbock is emblematic of her limited capacity to interact reasonably with a man she has feelings for. In order to hold his attention, Bette must keep Wenceslas a virtual prisoner in his own home. She knows that her hold over Steinbock could never be sexual and Bette makes the arrangement about money and debt.

Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy is another of the main protagonists. Hector has been married to Adeline Fischer for nearly 25 years. He and Adeline have one son, one daughter, and two grandchildren. His son Victorin is married to Célestine (Crevel). Daughter Hortense marries Count Wenceslas Steinbock. Baron Hulot is a supervisor in the French War Office and a man of prestige. However, Hulot squanders his money (including Hortense's 200,000 franc dowry) on women of low birth and character, supporting them in such a style as to send his own family into near poverty. The beginning of the novel marks the halfway point of Baron Hulot's slide into iniquity. Upon meeting and becoming involved with Valérie Marneffe, Hulot's sense of reason goes out the window.

In this section of the novel, the mistresses are introduced. Josépha Mariah, Jenny Cadine and Valérie Marneffe are powerful seductive forces in the lives of Hulot and Crevel. The older the two friends become, the wider the circle of involvements grows. In the case of the marriage of Victorin Hulot and Célestine Crevel, Josépha and Cadine are the power behind the throne. This single incident is representative of the influence held by women like Madame Marneffe.



Pages 149 - 286

Pages 149 - 286 Summary

Three years after Hortense and Wenceslas Steinbock are married, Madame Marneffe is bleeding Baron Hulot dry and he behaves as though he has not a care in the world. Valérie lives in high style on Baron Hulot's money. In public, though, she plays the part of the dutiful wife. People believe that Madame Marneffe is simply a friend of the Hulot family. Baron Hulot has no idea that his beloved Valérie is now Monsieur Crevel's mistress as well. Crevel pays Madame Marneffe 6,000 francs per year to keep him company. It is Bette who orchestrates the affair between Crevel and Madame Marneffe. By this time, Bette and Madame Marneffe have become the best of friends. Between the two of them, the women profit handsomely off of Valérie's clandestine involvements with the two wealthy old men. One day, however, Valérie admits to Bette that she is actually in love with Count Wenceslas Steinbock. Bette sees this revelation as another opportunity to ruin Adeline and her family.

Bette visits Adeline in their small apartment in the Rue Plumet. At Hector's suggestion, he and Adeline have moved into smaller accommodations in an effort to save money. In actuality, Hector continues to spend money on Madame Marneffe, while reducing Adeline to near-poverty. Bette notices that Adeline looks absolutely miserable. She is neglected by her husband, barely eats, and refuses to ask Hector for money. To make matters worse, Hortense is now borrowing money from Adeline just to make ends meet. Later that day, Adeline, Bette, Victorin, Célestine, Hortense, and Marshal Hulot (Hector's brother) all dine together. Victorin tells the others that a money lender by the name of Vauvinet is looking to collect on a debt of 60,000 francs incurred by Hector. Vauvinet is threatening to prosecute, which would ruin the Baron completely. Bette then goes about convincing Victorin and Hortense to persuade their uncle the Marshal to marry her. Bette promises that once married to the Marshal she will be in a position to help them and Adeline financially.

Later that evening, Valérie Marneffe's former lover, Baron Henri Montès de Montejanos, returns to her while she entertains Hulot, Crevel, and others. She lies, telling the men that Montejanos is her cousin. Madame Marneffe then berates Monsieur Crevel for "stealing" her away from Baron Hulot. After Crevel promises to increase her yearly stipend to 8,000 francs, Valérie Marneffe gives Crevel permission to tell the Baron of their affair. Valérie is bored with Hector Hulot. She then goes to Bette's rooms to meet with Montès in secret. In the street outside Valérie's house, Crevel tells Hulot that he has stolen Valérie away from him and that he and the Baron are now even. When Hector tries to unlock Valérie's gate, he finds that it is locked from the inside. Crevel then escorts Hector to the love nest he has set up for his meetings with Madame Marneffe. Hulot is crushed to learn that he is not Valérie's only lover. The next morning, Crevel and Hulot go their separate ways, only to run into one another at Valérie's house later that day. While Valérie, Henri Montès and Bette are sitting down to breakfast, Crevel drops by. Madame Marneffe agrees to continue seeing Crevel, but she tells



Crevel she needs more money. Crevel then boldly promises to marry Madame Marneffe the moment her husband dies. Monsieur Marneffe is not a well man and everyone knows it is only a matter of time before he passes away. Valérie Marneffe does not respond to Crevel's offer right away. Bette leaves to pay a call on Hortense and Wenceslas.

Everything had started out well for the talented Polish count and his beautiful bride. However, without Cousin Bette constantly hounding him to work, Wenceslas soon became quite lazy once again. As promised, Wenceslas completes the statue of Marshal Montcornet (Valérie Marneffe's biological father). Critics (including Wenceslas's good friend Stidmann) all agree that the Montcornet statue is a disaster. While Wenceslas does manage to make enough money to live on for some time, it is not long before Wenceslas, playing the role of the gentleman, returns to overspending. In a short while, Hortense and Wenceslas find themselves in debt again. Bette suggests that they borrow money from Madame Marneffe. Hortense flatly refuses, but Wenceslas decides to borrow from Madame Marneffe anyway. Before dining with Valérie Marneffe and others that evening, Bette warns Wenceslas about Madame Marneffe and her hypnotic power over men.

That evening, Valérie Marneffe and Bette Fischer dine with Count Wenceslas Steinbock, Monsieur Crevel, Victorin Hulot, Baron Hector Hulot, Stidmann and the art critic Claude Vignon. Of course, Madame Marneffe manages to captivate all the men, especially Wenceslas. Madame Marneffe agrees to lend Wenceslas 10,000 francs without charging him interest. Also, Madame Marneffe commissions Wenceslas to create a bronze statue depicting the story of Samson and Delilah. Then, Monsieur Crevel offers Wenceslas 100 gold crowns for a copy of the Samson and Delilah bronze if Wenceslas will use Madame Marneffe as the model for Delilah. Wenceslas agrees and he and Valérie Marneffe arrange to meet the next morning.

On the morning of the next day, Wenceslas Steinbock tells his lovely wife Hortense that he is going to work in his studio. Moments after her husband's departure, Hortense welcomes Monsieur Stidmann into her sitting room, only to be informed that the two men were to meet there. Hortense finds out that Stidmann, Wenceslas and the others were all at Madame Marneffe's house the previous evening. Upon hearing this news, Hortense becomes hysterical and her mother is sent for. Stidmann hurries to Madame Marneffe's home to warn Wenceslas that Hortense is dying. In the meantime, Adeline tells Hortense about Hector's extra-marital affairs and Hortense is shocked that Adeline has kept it to herself for so long. Wenceslas returns home, tells Hortense the truth about borrowing money from Valérie Marneffe and admits to Hortense that Valérie Marneffe repulses him. Hortense calms down significantly and Wenceslas stays away from Madame Marneffe for three weeks.

Valérie Marneffe, hating Hortense and wanting to get back at Wenceslas, writes him a letter in which she claims to be pregnant by him. Hortense intercepts the letter and leaves Wenceslas. Madame Marneffe tells her husband and Baron Hulot that the child is Hector's. Later, Madame Marneffe informs Crevel that he, too, is the father of her



unborn child. Montès, the Brazilian, also believes himself to be the father of Madame Marneffe's baby.

Baron Hulot speaks to one of his colleagues about promoting Monsieur Marneffe to head clerk. Hulot's friend, Roger, tells Hulot that people are already talking about his affair with Marneffe's wife Valérie. He tells Baron Hulot that to promote Monsieur Marneffe would cause a scandal and jeopardize the Baron's position in the War Office. Roger recommends that, rather than promoting Monsieur Marneffe, Baron Hulot secure himself a position on the Council of State where Hulot could work out the remainder of his days and retire comfortably.

At Valérie Marneffe's insistence, Baron Hulot agrees to convince Adeline to talk Hortense into reconciling with Wenceslas. However, when Hector tells Madame Marneffe that her husband will not be promoted to head clerk, she becomes upset. Madame Marneffe tells Hector Hulot that if her husband does not receive a promotion, her husband will not allow their affair to continue. Hulot promises to pay 1,200 francs per year as child support. Subsequently, Monsieur Crevel buys Madame Marneffe a house and once again promises to marry her as soon as Monsieur Marneffe dies. Bette tells Hector that she can no longer live under the same roof with Valérie Marneffe. Bette decides to move in with Hector's brother, Marshal Hulot, and keep house for him. In actuality, Bette plans to marry the elderly Marshal for his money.

The next morning, Baron Hulot tells his daughter Hortense to return to her husband Wenceslas. Hortense surprises the Baron by telling him that Wenceslas has fathered a child with Madame Marneffe. Shortly thereafter, Baron Hulot receives a message from Adeline's uncle Johann Fischer. Fischer tells Hulot that he is unable to send the Baron the 100,000 francs Hulot was expecting. Then, Marneffe confronts Baron Hulot in Hulot's office. The Baron informs Monsieur Marneffe that it will take at least two months for Marneffe to receive a promotion. Baron Hulot then receives a note from Valérie Marneffe, telling him that her husband has turned on her. Valérie claims Marneffe is mistreating her. She suggests that Baron Hulot run away with her. Valérie instructs Hulot to meet her in Bette's rooms at the Rue Vanneau. She begs Hulot to write back immediately with assurances of his love.

Baron Hector Hulot goes to Valérie Marneffe's home and is turned away at gunpoint. Monsieur Marneffe will no longer allow Hulot to keep his wife's company. Hector then returns to Adeline's apartment in the Rue Plumet. After dinner, he escorts Bette home. Bette tells the Baron that Valérie Marneffe has been intimate with Crevel but that Crevel's relationship with Valérie is coming to an end. Bette gives Baron Hulot Valérie Marneffe's key to Monsieur Crevel's love nest. Bette then requests that the Baron make a copy of the key. She tells the Baron that he is to meet Valérie Marneffe at the Rue du Dauphin love nest in two days' time. Hector promises Bette that he will have a word with the Marshal about the possibility of marriage. He then returns to Adeline and his family.

Baron Hulot remains with his family for a few days, and Adeline is convinced that Hector has changed. Adeline does not know that Hector has been meeting Madame Marneffe at Crevel's love nest every day. On the fourth day he is to meet with her, Valérie sends



Hector another note. Her husband is ill and Crevel is out of town. She asks Baron Hulot to meet her in the Rue du Dauphin at 9:00 that evening. Later, Hector Hulot and Valérie Marneffe are caught in bed together by Monsieur Marneffe and the police. Hulot will be charged with adultery. Marneffe, it would seem, has the upper hand. He secures Hector Hulot's promise to promote him to head clerk. Marneffe and Valérie leave, but not before Hector gives Valérie his word that they will run away together. The police officer who accompanies Marneffe reveals to Baron Hulot that the Marneffes framed him and intended to blackmail him.

Once again, Hector returns to Adeline and confesses everything. Adeline is happy that Hector is finally through with Madame Marneffe. Hulot, dejected and humiliated, goes to his wealthy and influential friend the Marshal Prince de Wissembourg and requests that Monsieur Marneffe be promoted immediately. The Prince agrees to sign off on Marneffe's advancement and sees to it that the police report and all documents pertaining to the Rue du Dauphin scandal are destroyed.

Cousin Bette, supposedly estranged from her best friend Valérie Marneffe, moves into Marshal Hulot's home as his housekeeper. Two weeks later Bette and the Marshal are engaged to be married. Adeline then goes to her brother-in-law and tells the Marshal the truth about her family's financial situation.

Hector Hulot receives an urgent message from uncle Johann Fischer in Algiers. Fischer is in dire need of 200,000 francs, which Baron Hulot does not have. Fischer's clerk has been embezzling money. He begs Hulot to dispatch a commissioner to Algiers right away to investigate the matter. Johann Fischer is bereft and vows to take his own life rather than stand trial before a military tribunal. The Baron tells Adeline about Johann Fischer's message. Adeline decides to accept Monsieur Crevel's offer to be his mistress for ten years at 20,000 a year. Adeline believes it is now her responsibility to save her uncle's life and preserve the dignity of the family.

Pages 149 - 286 Analysis

The second section of the novel finds intrigues in full effect. Bette's plan to humiliate Adeline and her family continues to unfold and Madame Marneffe is firmly established as an important character by virtue of her relationship with Hector Hulot. Hulot begins the long, painful process of detaching from Adeline after all their years together. Hulot is spending more and more of his family's money. He is now involved with a scheme to skim money off government profits in Algeria. Hector's depravity continues to blind his sense of reason and he inadvertently involves Johann Fischer in the scheme. While he gives Madame Marneffe gifts and a new place to live, Adeline is forced into rooms in the Rue Plumet, attended by one servant and unsure of where her next meal is coming from. She lives on next to nothing. Adeline never asks Hector for money, preferring instead to go to Hector's brother, Marshal Hulot.

Bette's venom is as potent as Madame Marneffe's and the two women become closer friends over time. Madame Marneffe squeezes money and material goods out of every



deep pocket she comes across. In addition to ongoing affairs with Hulot and Crevel, Valérie's third lover Montejanos arrives on the scene and near mayhem ensues. Montejanos returns from Brazil to claim Valérie for his own only to find her married and being taken care of by not one, but two, different men. Still, all three of Madame Marneffe's suitors believe that she loves them only.

The male characters either do now know or do not care about the tricks and games Valérie plays in order to keep them dancing around her. It is at this stage that Madame Marneffe brings another man into her expanding circle of victims. Wenceslas Steinbock walks into Madame Marneffe's trap with his eyes wide open. Perhaps it is his preoccupation with money that makes the Count throw caution to the wind even after Bette warns him about her friend. On the other hand, perhaps Wenceslas is bored with his marriage to Hortense and the constant demand for more of his artwork, deciding instead to explore other relationships as a means of self-distraction. Regardless of his motivation for doing so, Steinbock gladly turns to Valérie Marneffe for money. Thus, Count Steinbock's personal life hits a snag.

One turning point in the narrative comes on the evening of a dinner party at the Marneffe's home. Bette achieves a feeling of satisfaction from seeing all the important men in Adeline's life gathered around a woman who is basically a prostitute. The picture of Baron Hulot, Victorin Hulot and Wenceslas Steinbock paying court to a money-lending married woman with less-than-honorable intentions warms Bette's heart and gives her a firmer sense of resolve. She decides to marry Marshal Hulot, supposedly to relieve some of the Hulot family's financial woes.

Valérie Marneffe's paternity claims create havoc in the suitor's lives as Madame Marneffe lies to each of them about being the father. The pregnancy stir establishes an undercurrent of tension. The one thing to be certain of is that Madame Marneffe's child will be well taken care of. Hulot and Crevel both offer sums of money as assurances of their goodwill. Things continue to unravel for Baron Hulot and his family when Madame Marneffe refuses to see Hector on a regular basis. The Baron is devastated and bewildered by Valérie's decision to take up with Monsieur Crevel alone. Hector hears from Johann Fischer in Algiers. Hulot is unable to raise the money Fischer has requested and the Baron is essentially ruined.

After Hector is turned away by Monsieur Marneffe, Bette ingratiates herself to Hector by arranging a meeting in the love nest located in the Rue du Dauphin. Hector is an addict and he will stop at nothing to be near Valérie Marneffe. The meeting is a trap, another one of Valérie's schemes to take advantage of poor, foolish Baron Hulot. Madame Marneffe and her husband attempt to blackmail Hector. Fortunately, Hector has friends in high places. Marshal the Prince de Wissembourg is able to make the entire episode disappear. Hector's luck and favor with the Prince de Wissembourg is about to run out.

Bette moves into the home of Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim and no one in the Hulot family protests.



Taken to the depths of desperation by her husband's infidelities, Baroness Hulot decides to prostitute herself to Monsieur Crevel for 20,000 francs a year. Adeline's decision goes against everything she believes in and yet she takes no pain over her choice. Like a lamb to the slaughter, she prepares herself mentally and emotionally for her own degradations at the hands of Monsieur Crevel. Adeline chooses to help Uncle Johann, Hortense, Victorin and especially Hector by selling herself to her husband's old friend rather than be turned out into the street.



Pages 287 to 437

Pages 287 to 437 Summary

Adeline Hulot, having made the decision to become Crevel's mistress for ten years, sends Monsieur Crevel an invitation and prepares for his arrival. Initially, Crevel rejects Adeline's suggestion, telling her of his plans to marry Madame Marneffe. Seeing Adeline's despair, however, Crevel is touched and promises Adeline that he will give her the 200,000 francs within two hours. On the way to the bank, Crevel stops at Madame Marneffe's home and tells her of the meeting with Adeline Hulot. Valérie berates Crevel for wanting to help Adeline and throws him out.

Now Marshal Hulot's fiancée, Bette tells the Marshal about Hector's repeated indiscretions. Brokenhearted, the Marshal goes to the Prince de Wissembourg to try and secure some sort of paid position for Adeline. In the meantime, the Prince de Wissembourg calls Hector Hulot into his office. The Prince knows that Hulot is behind the embezzlement scheme in Algiers. Just then, Marshal Hulot arrives and reads a dispatch addressed to the Prince which proves Hector's involvement in the embezzlement scandal. Johann Fischer has killed himself in prison. Marshal Hulot assures the Prince de Wissembourg that the 200,000 francs the Baron stole from the government will be repaid. The Prince forces Hector Hulot to retire. The Prince then calls for Marneffe and offers Marneffe an ultimatum: either Marneffe comes up with 200,000 francs or he will be sent to Algiers. Marneffe tells the Prince that he would rather resign. Hector's resignation is written about in the newspaper.

The Brothers Hulot return to the Marshal's house. The Marshal then offers Hector a pistol and recommends that Hector take his own life. Hector has dishonored and ruined the entire family. Bette sees this and sends for Adeline who comes and retrieves her husband. The Marshal refuses to ever see or speak to his brother ever again. The following day, Marshal Hulot returns 200,000 francs to the Prince de Wissembourg. Within three days, Marshal Hulot is dead. Bette's plans to ruin Adeline and her family are stalled. Since the Marshal is no longer a viable marriage prospect, Bette Fischer once again becomes the poor, countrified cousin.

Learning of his brother's death, Hector decides to leave Adeline for good. He lies, telling Adeline that he only plans to be away for a month. Hector has nothing to offer his family in the way of support. His War Office pension is pledged for four years and he still owes Vauvinet the loan shark a considerable sum of money as well. Hector assures Adeline that going underground for awhile is the wisest thing to do for the family. Soon after, Hector leaves without any warning. When Adeline finds Hector gone, she becomes ill and is bed-ridden for an entire month. Hector Hulot then goes to the house of his former mistress Josépha Mariah. He tells Josépha that he is destitute and asks Josépha to intercede on his behalf and ask the Duke d'Hérovuille to find him employment. Josépha suggests to Baron Hulot that he marry a young woman named Olympe Bijou. Olympe is sixteen years old and comes from a poor family. Josépha Mariah tells Hector that she



will borrow enough money from the Duke d'Hérouville to set the young Olympe up in business. Josépha says that Hector could oversee the business. She confidently suggests to Hector that such an arrangement would be mutually beneficial. Hulot changes his name to Monsieur Thoul and takes up residence with Olympe Bijou and her family, supported indirectly by the Duke d'Hérouville. Hector has no contact with Adeline or his children.

The Marshal Prince de Wissembourg gives Victorin Hulot 200,000 francs and finds Adeline Hulot a paid position as a Lady Superintendent of Charities. The charities are patronized by the wives of rich and powerful Parisians. Victorin, now a successful lawyer, is able to have his mother, Hortense and his nephew Wenceslas and Cousin Bette all living under his roof. Bette once again becomes a housekeeper but she manages to visit Valérie Marneffe at least once a month. Valérie gives birth to a stillborn child. A short while later Monsieur Marneffe dies. After waiting the required eleven months, Monsieur Crevel and Valérie Marneffe make plans to marry. Hortense finds out that Victorin has seen Wenceslas out on the town with Madame Marneffe.

Adeline searches for Hector every morning when she goes into the streets of Paris for her charity work. One day, Adeline tells Hortense, Bette and Célestine that an old friend of the Baron's recently saw him at the Ambigu Comique theater with a strikingly beautiful young lady. Adeline is convinced that this means Hector will eventually return to his family. Bette then receives a note from Hector asking her for 300 francs. No one in the family suspects that for the past six months, Bette has been giving Hector money. By indulging Hector's infidelities, Bette knows she is keeping Adeline and Hector apart.

Victorin Hulot decides to rid himself and his family of Valérie Marneffe once and for all. Adeline goes to the home of opera singer Josépha Mariah, the "prima donna of the Royal Academy of Music" (355). Adeline asks Josépha to help her find Hector and bring him home. Josépha tells Adeline that for the past six months, she and the Duke d'Hérouville have been supporting Hector and Olympe Bijou. However, Josépha has recently lost track of Hector. Adeline learns that Hector emptied out his bank account and left the business, Olympe, and the entire Bijou family behind. At first, Josépha is rather apprehensive about assisting Adeline, but she finally relents when she realizes just how much Adeline loves Hector Hulot. Josépha gives Adeline her word that she will find Hector. Josépha offers Olympe's mother 1,000 francs to locate Baron Hector Hulot.

While Adeline visits Josépha Mariah, Victorin welcomes a mysterious guest into his office. The woman, who uses the name Madame de Saint-Estève, has come to assist Victorin with a plan to dispose of Madame Valérie Marneffe and Monsieur Crevel. Through her marriage to Crevel, Madame Marneffe gains access to large sums of money which Victorin believes should go to his wife Célestine. Madame de Saint-Estève (alias Madame Nourison) is familiar with the story of Crevel and Valérie and she proposes to cause the young widow's death and make it look like an accident. The price for such an accident is 40,000 francs. After the old woman leaves, Victorin goes to the police hoping to find out who sent Madame de Saint-Estève to help him. Victorin is told that the police know nothing about Madame de Saint-Estève. Victorin returns home, confused, and tries to decide what to do.



Cousin Bette meets with Hector Hulot the next morning. Bette gives the Baron 2,000 francs and Hector Hulot leaves another young woman in pursuit of something different. Most recently, the Baron has fallen in love with Atala Judici who lives in the Rue de Charonne, "a part of town where no fuss is made about anything" (373). Hulot changes his name again. He now goes by the name Père Thoree. Bette returns home and mentions her meeting with Hector to no one.

Monsieur Crevel visits the Hulot-Fischer-Steinbock home the next morning. Célestine is overjoyed to see her father. Crevel has not seen his daughter in nearly two years. Crevel informs Victorin and the others that he is going to marry Valérie Marneffe and he would like their blessing. Victorin and Célestine refuse to attend the wedding. Neither Hortense nor Adeline will attend the ceremony. Monsieur Crevel is shocked at his family's reaction to Valérie Marneffe. Crevel and Bette visit Valérie. Valérie and Wenceslas Steinbock are together. Crevel does not know that Valérie and Steinbock are having an affair. Crevel wants an ostentatious wedding, while Valérie thinks something smaller would do less to alienate the Hulot family and those around town who are familiar with her past. Valérie threatens to ruin the entire family once and for all if they do not receive her graciously as Madame Crevel. Bette passes on the news of Madame Marneffe's threat, saying that her friend knows something concerning Adeline and 200,000 francs. Hearing this, Adeline falls ill once again and the doctors fear her sanity may be in peril.

The following day, Victorin Hulot once again meets with the diabolical Madame de Saint-Estève. Victorin and his "client" agree on a sum of 50,000 francs for the arrangement of Madame Marneffe's accidental death. Saint-Estève guarantees her work and that of her associates.

Baron Montès de Montejanos joins several others for dinner at the luxurious Rocher de Cancale restaurant the following evening. Among those in attendance are Carabine, a famously beautiful courtesan, Josépha Mariah and her benefactor the Duke d'Hérouville. Bixiou (another renowned Parisian courtesan) and Mademoiselle Jenny Cadine, the actress, are at the party as well. Finally, a young woman named Cydalise, lovely and innocent, newly arrived in Paris, rounds out the group. Cydalise, it is said, attends the festivities at the Rocher de Cancale as part of a plan to tempt Montès away from the future Madame Crevel as a means of defeating her and humiliating her socially. Through a series of clever machinations put into effect by Madame Nourrison (alias Madame de Saint-Estève) Baron de Montejanos agrees to throw over Valérie Marneffe and take young Cydalise as his mistress. However, Valérie continues to string the Brazilian along, promising Montejanos that she will marry him in two years. Shortly thereafter, Valérie Marneffe becomes Madame Crevel. Monsieur Crevel invites Montejanos to the wedding out of spite.

Within a month of marrying Monsieur Crevel, Valérie breaks off her affair with Wenceslas Steinbock. After being thrown out by Madame Crevel, Wenceslas encounters Victorin Hulot who takes Wenceslas home to Hortense. This angers Bette, who confronts Valérie Marneffe Crevel. Valérie sends Bette away and meets with Montejanos.



Adeline's health continues to improve even though Hector's whereabouts remain unknown. Victorin receives a visitor. The man, dressed in rags, is actually one of Madame Nourrison's associates who has come to collect the 50,000 francs Victorin agreed to pay to get rid of Valérie Crevel. Victorin pays the man, who disappears without a trace. Adeline, Victorin, Hortense and Célestine have a discussion with Adeline's doctor in which they learn that Monsieur Crevel and his new wife, Valérie, have both been stricken with a mysterious contagious disease caused by "rapid blood poisoning" (413). Cousin Bette, Célestine and Victorin go to visit Monsieur Crevel and Valérie. Both Monsieur and Madame Crevel are dead within a week.

One morning on her charity rounds, Adeline Hulot meets Atala Judici. Atala is a girl of about fifteen and a half years old who ran away from her parents' home. Atala now lives with an older man named Monsieur Vyder who provides her with food and shelter. Adeline questions the girl as to her living situation but Atala sees nothing wrong about living with "Daddy" Vyder. Adeline arranges to meet with Monsieur Vyder and discovers that he is really her husband, Baron Hector Hulot. Hector agrees to return home with Adeline and leaves Atala Judici behind. Upon his return home, Hector's family is overjoyed to have him back. Bette, unable to tolerate the happiness and prosperity of Adeline and the other Hulots, takes to her bed. Bette has been ill for quite a long while, but she fails to tell anyone about the severity of her condition. Soon after Hector Hulot's return home, Bette Fischer dies of pulmonary consumption with hatred filling her heart. Her family gathers round her bed in her final moments. Hector stays with his family for three years.

When Célestine hires a new kitchen-maid, the young woman goes virtually unnoticed until Baron Hulot becomes infatuated with her. One evening, Adeline discovers Hector with Agathe, the kitchen-maid. Hector tells Agathe that Adeline does not have long to live and that he and Agathe can soon be married. Three days later, Adeline Fischer Hulot dies. Three days after Adeline's funeral, Hector marries Agathe Piquetard.

Pages 287 to 437 Analysis

The final section of Balzac's novel brings resolution to several major plot points. Crevel awakens to Adeline Hulot's true character, which prompts his promise to her of 200,000 francs. Crevel never acts on this generous reward for Adeline's selflessness. Instead, Crevel is talked out of helping Adeline by a jealous, petulant Madame Marneffe. This event is pivotal to the Crevel-Marneffe story line. Siding with Madame Marneffe seals Crevel's fate.

After Bette moves into his residence to keep house, Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim is crushed and embarrassed to find out that his younger brother Hector has turned to larceny. The Marshal is an old-fashioned soldier of the highest rank. In his estimation, a crime against one's own government is similar to murder. Promising the Prince de Wissembourg that the 200,000 francs would be repaid is Marshal Hulot's way of saving the family's face and good reputation. He does not offer de Wissembourg restitution for his wayward brother's sake. The Comte de Forzheim is gallant to a fault,



even in matters too scandalous to discuss in public. By disinheriting Hector, and offering Hector the pistol, the Comte de Forzheim solidifies his personal belief in maintaining one's honor and steering clear of intentional self-disgrace. Consequently, Hector's lust and addiction to infidelity costs the Comte de Forzheim his life. Johann Fischer's suicide in prison and Marshal Hulot's unexpected demise from shame and heartbreak both foreshadow the deaths of Crevel and Madame Marneffe, Adeline, and Bette Fischer.

Additionally, Marshal Hulot's death sends Bette Fischer's plan into a tailspin. Without the Marshal's income to rely upon, Bette is not far from where she started. However, the months and years spent working with Madame Marneffe do yield a tidy annual salary. As the country cousin once again, Bette must begin the quest for Adeline's downfall from the beginning. The Count de Forzheim's death proves to be a substantial blow to Bette. In addition, the birth of Madame Marneffe's stillborn child affects Bette deeply although this phenomena is not addressed in the narrative. It can be assumed that the incident simply compounded an impending feeling of collapse for Bette Fischer.

When Hector Hulot escapes from his wife and family, Adeline takes to her bed right away. This feature of Baroness Hulot's personality indicates that the character suffers from an inability to repress her feelings any longer. Rather than becoming angry with Hector, Adeline crumbles into a nervous, trembling heap. Her anger is turned inward on herself and Adeline victimizes herself the way Hector victimizes her.

In the case of Olympe Bijou, it is clear that Baron Hulot's taste in companions is diminishing since the girl is not quite 16 years old yet. There is something suspect about a man close to 55 or 60 years of age who takes a close interest in the welfare of a teenage girl. Josépha Mariah acts as a kind of pimp, bringing Hector Hulot and Olympe Bijou together. Her rationale for doing so is that Olympe's family is very poor and Baron Hulot needs a place to live and some kind of income. Before meeting Adeline Hulot, Josépha Mariah has no concept of how hurtful her actions have been to the Baroness. Mariah is a rather hard-hearted woman whose sole concern is herself and her comfort. Adeline has the same effect on Mademoiselle Mariah as she has on Monsieur Crevel. Mariah is enthralled by the compassion and love which exudes from Adeline Hulot. Adeline is free from anger and bitterness. She sincerely desires the return of her beloved husband. Adeline softens Mademoiselle Mariah's outlook and in doing so, Adeline gains another powerful ally.

The windfall of 200,000 francs that Victorin receives from the Prince de Wissembourg is what ultimately saves the young lawyer and his small family from total disaster. Bette's continued support of Baron Hulot undermines Adeline's efforts to find her husband and bring him home. Madame Marneffe's campaign of terror against the Hulots continues until the time of her marriage to Monsieur Crevel. Madame Marneffe is unaware of Victorin's plan to remove her from the equation once and for all.

Madame Marneffe's affairs eventually come to a stop after she becomes the wealthy Madame Crevel. After she and Monsieur Crevel become gravely ill, Madame Crevel ceases to be a problem for Victorin Hulot. Hector Hulot, is on to his sixth "pretend wife," another teenage girl named Atala Judici. Hulot (who changes his name to Monsieur



Vyder) lives with the girl and assumes responsibility for her food, clothing and shelter. Hulot even gives money to Atala Judici's mother and father. Adeline and Hector Hulot are reunited again for a short period before Adeline, too, passes away. Hers is the last death resulting from Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy's excesses. Along with his wife, Madame and Monsieur Crevel, Johann Fischer and Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim all fell prey to Hulot's inability to control his urges.

Bette Fischer is eventually consumed by the vile jealousy she nursed and cultivated throughout her life. Victorin, Célestine, Hortense and their children escape the specter of Baron Hulot who, after running away with Agathe Piquetard the kitchen-maid, is never heard from again.



Characters

Lisbeth Fischer

Known to her relatives as Cousin Bette, Lisbeth Fischer is from the Lorraine region in France. Bette is a peasant, unmarried and quite unattractive at the beginning of the narrative. Bette harbors a vehement jealousy against her cousin, Adeline Hulot. Lisbeth (Bette) Fischer is Adeline Hulot's cousin. Although Bette's father was the oldest of the Fischer brothers, Bette is five years younger than Adeline. The two women grew up together and Bette has always been jealous of Adeline's beauty and life of privilege. After her marriage to Hector, Adeline invites Bette to live with them in Paris. Since she is too ugly to marry off and too poor to offer any man a dowry, Hector arranges a situation for Bette. She is apprenticed to the Pons brothers, embroiderers to the French imperial court. Soon, Bette learns to read, write, and keep accounts in hopes of one day going into business for herself. At one point, Baron Hulot attempts to set Bette up in business with Monsieur Rivet (who purchased the Pons brothers' business) but Bette refuses. Bette's family has always treated her well. Hulot would buy her firewood in the winter and she is often a guest in Adeline's home. When the novel begins, Bette has managed to ingratiate herself to the Hulot family. Adeline is completely unaware of Bette's seething hatred for her and the rest of the Hulots. Nonetheless, for some reason, Adeline is the only one who does not trust Bette with her secrets. Bette has old-fashioned sensibilities and insists on dressing like a provincial. Thus, she is never invited to fashionable events. Bette is dark-skinned and has black hair and thick eyebrows. Baron Hulot calls Bette "the Nanny Goat."

Baroness Adeline Hulot

Born Adeline Fischer, the Baroness Hulot is the first cousin of Bette Fischer. Like Bette, Adeline was born in Lorraine and raised by her uncle Johann Fischer. It is Adeline's beauty and graceful demeanor that evoke torrents of jealousy in Bette. Adeline is close to 50 years old but many still consider her to be a striking woman. Adeline has been married to Baron Hector Hulot for twenty-five years or so and they have two children: Victorin and Hortense. Victorin is a young lawyer, married to Célestine Crevel. Hortense is married to Count Wenceslas Steinbock, the artist. Adeline Hulot's primary focus in life is her husband Hector. Whether through some personality flaw or simply through sheer denial, Adeline's love for Hector Hulot is unwavering. Johann Fischer has a soft spot for his niece Adeline because she sacrifices her entire life to Hector. Adeline feels powerless to stop Hector from cheating on her repeatedly. She says nothing of her feelings for many years. Adeline accepts whatever Hector tells her and keeps her misery to herself. Conversely, Adeline feels a sense of superiority for her ability to restrain herself when it comes to expressing her true feelings.. She places herself above those women who have no control over their emotions. Adeline Hulot is proud of her ability to subjugate her needs in favor of the needs of others. She does not allow



herself the luxury of causing a scene. Adeline prays a great deal for the unification of her immediate family.

The character is distinguished from Cousin Bette and Madame Marneffe by her willingness to debase herself to secure her family's future. Adeline is prepared to be Monsieur Crevel's mistress for ten years. Her company would cost Crevel the sum of 20,000 francs a year. Unlike Madame Marneffe and Bette, Adeline places others before herself. The thought of 200,000 francs eased her mind and quickened her resolve to save Hortense and the others from further shame and scandal. Adeline's selfless intentions soften Crevel's heart.

Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy

Hector Hulot uses the name "d'Ervy" to signify the place of his birth. Hulot is the husband of Adeline Fischer and the father of Victorin Hulot and Countess Hortense Steinbock. By marriage, he is the cousin of Bette Fischer and the nephew of Johann Fischer. Hector is the younger brother of the Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim. In his younger years, Hulot was extremely handsome. Tall, slim and blue-eyed, Hector and young Adeline made a picture perfect couple. (Now in his 50s, however, Hector Hulot dies his hair and mustache until Valérie Marneff convinces him not to and then berates him for being vain). Hector made a name for himself in the War Office and began his ascent into the upper echelons of Parisian life. At one point, Hulot was very much in love with his wife. However sometime after 1823 the Baron's attitude toward marital fidelity shifted and he embarked on a life-long journey from one extra-marital relationship to another. The affairs themselves were nowhere near as shocking as the amount of money Hulot spent on his mistresses.

Hulot is a man with a weakness for women. He is unable to control his desire to pursue and win a woman's affections. Furthermore, Baron Hulot insists on throwing money at women like Josépha Mariah and the notorious Valérie Marneffe. Hulot and other Parisian men of the time would buy women houses, give them clothing, expensive jewelry and yearly allowances. Hector, however, throws money after desire until he is faced with prison and total ruin. Hector Hulot's actions belie a blatant disregard for his wife and family. Rather than putting a stop to his wayward behavior, Hulot digs a deeper hole for himself by borrowing money from disreputable people like Vauvinet. In one sense, Hector Hulot is living on borrowed time. With his creditors pursuing him and his name disgraced because of the scandal in Algiers, Hector finally runs away from home and from Adeline. Yet, he continues to dodge and scheme, going from one pretend marriage to the next, never giving a thought to anyone but himself. Hulot outlives his devoted wife only to escape to another town and marry a kitchen-maid.

Hector Hulot never changes.



Valérie Marneffe

Valérie Marneffe seems to be every man's ideal. She is said to be "elegant looking [...] young, small, slender and pretty" (56). Valérie cultivates the skills to seduce men and keep them enthralled enough to shower her with cash and gifts. Adeline Hulot is right to think that there are some women gifted in the art of enticing men and holding them hostage long enough to bleed them dry and toss them aside. When Valérie first meets Baron Hulot, she is a young woman of 23, married to a clerk in a dead-end job. The illegitimate daughter of Marshal Montcornet, a decorated hero of the French empire, Madame Marneffe sees herself as being owed something. Namely, she believes that being the daughter of a decorated soldier entitles her to a life of style and ease. Once involved with Baron Hulot, Valérie begins to believe that she can have whatever she wants from any man she chooses. This, unfortunately, turns out to be true. Madame Marneffe is adept at presenting herself to a man wrapped in an attractive package. From the way she styles her hair to her stockings and accessories, Valérie Marneffe performs femininity the way some people play a part onstage. She is able to make men respond to her based on certain stimuli. A well-placed curl, a particular perfume or a gardenia tucked into a bodice just right are weapons in Madame Marneffe's capable hands.

Curiously, not much is known about the true nature of Valérie Marneffe's relationship with her husband. Although the two of them hatch a plot to blackmail and discredit Baron Hulot, there appears to be no love lost between them. Monsieur and Madame Marneffe hold one another in mutual contempt. Madame Marneffe is not particularly attached to her young son, Stanislas. Monsieur Marneffe has a tendency to be cruel to Valérie but the extent of the cruelty is vague. It is never made clear what keeps the couple together. One could assume the Marneffe's marriage lasts because both partners are receiving some sort of incentive to remain living as husband and wife.

Célestin Crevel

Monsieur Crevel is a widower of fifty-two years of age when the novel begins. A former tradesman (perfumer), Crevel owns a substantial amount of wealth, which he wants to leave to his daughter, Célestine (Crevel) Hulot. For this reason, Monsieur Crevel prefers to keep a mistress rather than sink large sums of money into matrimony. Crevel is a round, stout pretentious man of no great height and showy manners. He has a habit of striking poses similar to those of Napoleon Bonaparte, often tucking his thumbs into his waistcoat and showing his profile. Having been a merchant for so long, Crevel believes he has an eye for what is fashionable. His taste in home decor borders on cheap opulence. Crevel imitates what his betters do. Célestin Crevel is an old friend and competitor of Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy. The two aging men chase women like others chase butterflies. Hulot steals Josépha Mariah from Crevel who then makes advances to Adeline Hulot in an hour of desperation. After Adeline turns him down, Crevel steals Madame Marneffe from Baron Hulot.



Crevel catches his mistresses with his wealth and position. Unlike Hulot, however, Monsieur Crevel does hold onto substantial sums of money and securities. Crevel is the greedy type but he also shows himself to be a shrewd businessman. His heart does not overrule his head very often. Crevel's priority is making money and making money work for him. Upon his death and the death of his second wife, Valérie, Célestin Crevel's daughter is well-taken care of. It is a stroke of bad fortune that Crevel's short marriage to Valérie turns out to be a hollow victory when he is caught in Madame de Saint-Estève's web of murder. He dies of poisoning.

Victorin Hulot

Victorin Hulot is the only son of Baron Hector Hulot and Baroness Adeline Fischer Hulot. Victorin is married to Célestine Crevel. Victorin is the father of a young child, born around the same time as his nephew Wenceslas Steinbock, Jr. Victorin, by the close of the narrative, is a well-known and respected lawyer in Paris. It is due to Victorin's persistence and ambition that the Hulot family is ultimately saved from complete devastation. Victorin is the unexpected champion of his mother Adeline and his sister Hortense. The only person who seems unsurprised at Victorin's triumph is his loyal wife, Célestine. Victorin, like his sister Hortense, is for a long time unaware of the Adeline's torment over his father's affairs. Victorin seeks out Madame de Saint-Estève as a final solution to rid himself of the curse of Valérie Marneffe. Somehow, Victorin's profession poses no deterrent to his determination to raise the Hulots out of the mire of disgrace.

Victorin is a different kind of Parisian husband. He is faithful to his wife, a good and generous provider and Victorin is loyal to his family. Status and notoriety do not change Victorin's view on life. Most importantly, Victorin is the only character who is immune to Valérie Marneffe. Not once does Victorin waver in his affection for his wife. Unlike his father, his father-in-law and his brother-in-law, Victorin chooses the woman to whom he is married over the bewitching Madame Marneffe.

Hortense Hulot

Hortense is the only daughter of Hector and Adeline Hulot. Hortense is beautiful like her mother. Also like her mother, Hortense believes that she will find true love one day. Hortense is in her early 20s, with long, thick blond hair and luminous blue eyes. Her "skin has the lustre [sic] of mother-of-pearl" (31). Hortense's features are fine and she is feminine and genteel. Unlike her mother, though, Hortense is impatient and outspoken. Her independent streak is what enables Hortense to leave Wenceslas at the first sign of trouble with Madame Marneffe. Hortense has a well-defined sense of what is right and wrong in a marriage. To her credit, Hortense does not break her wedding vows to Wenceslas during the three years he spent in the clutches of Madame Marneffe. Hortense represents what is noble and charming about Parisian women. She is loyal to those she loves and protective of their dignity.



Count Wenceslas Steinbock

Wenceslas Steinbock is an artist and a nobleman. A refugee from Poland, Steinbock has a great deal of talent and vision, but not much motivation to earn a living creating art. Wenceslas has a sensitive nature, as his artwork proves, but he is nonetheless undisciplined and rather easily swayed. Living as Bette Fischer's protegee, Wenceslas is kept on a very short leash because of Bette's jealousy. However, living under the same roof with Bette brings Steinbock to the point of actually producing, selling and receiving commissions for art. Once away from Bette, though, Wenceslas's desire wanes. With Hortense as his loving wife, Wenceslas falls back into his old habits. He then comes under the spell of Madame Marneffe as a result of financial problems. Upon meeting the woman, Wenceslas is immediately smitten. Even after Madame Marneffe lies about being pregnant with the Count's baby, which causes Hortense to leave him, Wenceslas chooses not to resist. For three years, he lives away from Hortense and allows himself to be treated like Madame Marneffe's lap dog. Since Wenceslas does not have access to great material wealth, Madame Marneffe could never be seriously interested in him. It is not until Madame Marneffe throws him out that Wenceslas comes to his senses. Upon returning home to Hortense, Wencelsas remains talented, lazy, and directionless.

Wenceslas has gray eyes and "silky chestnut hair" as well as "thin drawn features" and a "delicate chin" (85). Steinbock's appearance and his passionate nature make him especially attractive to women. Madame Marneffe and Hortense both see something pale and romantic in Steinbock's face. Also, there is romance in art as fine as his. Finally, Wenceslas is a man who is emotionally demonstrative; Steinbock is not afraid to show his feelings.

Sadly, Wenceslas Stienbock is another character whose personality does not expand over the course of the narrative. In this way, he is like his father-in-law Baron Hulot. Wenceslas does not keep a mistress, he is Madame Marneffe's companion. Rather than paying an attractive woman to keep him company, Steinbock prefers to pay court as the (potential) other man.

Célestine Crevel Hulot

Célestine Hulot is the only beloved daughter of Monsieur Célestin Crevel. Célestine is the wife of young Victorin Hulot. Célestine is plain-faced but good-hearted and she is her husband's most enthusiastic supporter. She is level headed and open to reason. Célestine has no illusions about the family she marries into. She is determined to set a better example than her in-laws and her father. Célestine does love her father, though and she is willing to forgive him at some point. Célestine is a fine mother and Hortense's best friend and confidante. Célestine Hulot is one of only handful of characters in Balzac's novel who is not motivated by greed or avarice. Her home and her family come before everything and she is fiercely protective of those she holds dear.



Monsieur Marneffe

Monsieur Jean-Paul Stanislas Marneffe is married to the cunning and beautiful Valérie. The narrator describes Monsieur Marneffe as "a small, lean creature, with thin hair and a starved beard" (58). Marneffe wears glasses and a worn, pasty complexion. His eyelids are red and his walk is more of a shuffle. Marneffe is roughly 38 years old and nothing is known of his background. He is a clerk in the War Office, one of Baron Hector Hulot's subordinates. Marneffe is not a well man in the physical sense. He suffers from a pulmonary condition of which he eventually dies. Marneffe and his wife are business partners of a sort. Both are willing to trade Valérie's time and reputation in order to gain money and prestige. Marneffe is not an attractive man and like several other characters in the novel, he is driven by lust and greed. Marneffe behaves as his wife's pimp, essentially, as he is fully aware of Valérie's love affairs. As her husband and guardian, he profits from her dalliances as well. Marneffe is a cruel man with rough sensibilities and rude manners.

Johann Fischer

Johann Fischer is the uncle of Baroness Adeline Fischer Hulot and Mademoiselle Lisbeth Fischer. After both of his brothers die, Johann becomes one of two unofficial patriarchs of the Hulot-Fischer clan. He shares the esteemed position with Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim, Baron Hulot's older brother. Johann Fischer is just one of a number people who give Hector Hulot money to keep Hector's clandestine relationships afloat. Since Adeline suffers in silence while Hector carries on with other women, Uncle Johann feels a special sense of obligation to her. In the end, Johann Fischer discovers that Hector never intended to help him and Fischer, like the rest, is ruined. Shame over his unwitting part in the Algerian embezzlement scandal (perpetrated by Hector Hulot) is the reason Johann Fischer commits suicide in prison. Johann Fischer is a victim of Baron Hulot's irresponsible womanizing and lack of moral accountability. Furthermore, Johann Fischer is a representative of a time in France when men behaved honorably and kept their vices in check.

Marshal the Prince de Wissembourg

Marshal the Prince de Wissembourg is another of the French old guard, associated with Napoleon and his illustrious days as Emperor. De Wissembourg is Baron Hulot's superior at the War Office. The Marshal is a powerful ally to have and Hulot enjoys the fruits of this friendship for a good many years. However, de Wissembourg steps in and puts a stop to Hector's hi-jinx when the Algeria scandal is uncovered. The Prince de Wissembourg, much like Hector's older brother the Comte de Forzheim, believes in upholding one's honor and one's good family name. De Wissembourg is influential in the French government and it is clear that he has covered up Hector's mistakes once too often. The Marshal the Prince de Wissembourg also has special feelings toward Adeline because of what the Baron has put her through. He leaves Hector to his own devices after leaving the War Office, but de Wissembourg restores the family's dignity



by giving Victorin Hulot 200,000 francs, which came from Victorin's uncle, Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim.

Baron Henri Montès de Montejanos

Baron de Montejanos is a Brazilian with French ancestry. He has dark skin and hazel eyes. His hair is jet-black and his face wears a broody expression. Montès is fabulously wealthy, dashing, exotic and handsome. Montès is fiery and haughty, confident and reserved—the ideal man, some would say. Hopelessly in love with Madame Marneffe, Montès (as he is often called) is willing and ready to escape to Brazil with her and care for her for the remainder of her life. Montès is sweet-natured and somewhat gullible. This is evident in the way he allows Valérie Marneffe to toy with his affections and stall for time. More than the other men surrounding her, Montès seems to actually care for Valérie.

Mademoiselle Agathe Piquetard

Agathe Piquetard is a young woman from the village of Isigny in Lower Normandy. Agathe is a strong country girl, not especially pretty but sturdy. She is "as buxom as a wet nurse" according to the narrator. Agathe has a ruddy complexion, a short waist and strong, red arms (435). Agathe is hired as a kitchen-maid for the Hulot family after Hector's return to Adeline and the home. Shortly after she begins working for Baron Hulot, Mademoiselle Piquetard and the Baron begin an affair. Three days after Adeline dies, Agathe and Hector return to her hometown where they are subsequently married. Mademoiselle Piquetard becomes the second Baroness Hulot.

Mademoiselle Atala Judici

Atala Judici is just one of a number of young girls who live as "pretend wives" of Hector Hulot. She is almost 16 years old and already beautiful. Atala has ivory white skin like lilies and dark hair and eyes. Atala (like the others) comes from a poor family. She runs away from a mother who beats her and a father who mistreats her and sets up house with "Monsieur Vyder" (alias Baron Hector Hulot) and becomes his "little wife" (426). Atala calls him "Daddy Vyder," and depends on Hector for her food, clothing and shelter. Hector even partially supports Atala Judici's parents. The young girl has no idea that what goes on between herself and Baron Hulot is wrong. She views their relationship as mutually beneficial, if somewhat confusing. It is unclear from the narrative whether or not Atala Judici's relationship with "Daddy Vyder" is at all sexual.

Josépha Mariah

Josépha Mariah is the former mistress of Monsieur Crevel and Baron Hulot. She has been known to leave a rich man for an even richer one. Josépha is unapologetic about the way she chooses to live. Her sense of style and taste is impeccable. Women like



Valérie Marneffe envy Mariah what she has because she is a woman of fine sensibility. Josépha is an exciting, interesting woman. She is an opera singer who is currently being kept in luxury by her lover the Duke d'Hérouville. Like many others, Josépha is a gorgeous woman. At the same time, though, Mariah proves that she is concerned with more than how many thousands of francs she can bring in per year. Her moral compass is stronger than that of her counterparts. Josépha Mariah is a sympathetic character whose transformation occurs when she first encounters Adeline Hulot. Josépha is redeemed by the pity and respect she feels for Adeline, which mitigates her role in helping Hector hide from his creditors and his family. Even though she and Baroness Hulot are miles apart socially and spiritually, Josépha Mariah still recognizes Adeline's purity of heart and fearless hope as something extraordinary.

Madame de Saint-Estève (also known as Madame Nourrisson)

A lower-class woman of dubious integrity, Madame Nourrisson is a shadowy figure whose specialty is orchestrating murder for a hefty fee. Nourrisson and her associates are particularly adept at arranging "accidents." Victorin Hulot makes contact with Mme. Nourrisson through the Paris Police who, of course, know nothing about her.

Marshal Hulot the Comte de Forzheim

Marshal Hulot is the older brother of Baron Hector Hulot. He is a bachelor and a retired soldier. Marshal Hulot feels pity for Adeline because she continues to put up with Hector's reckless behavior. The Marshal has a stellar reputation as a military man and he is highly respected in many different circles in Paris. Mostly, the Comte de Forzheim is known for his sense of justice and what is right. Marshal Hulot is a close associate of the Marshal Prince de Wissembourg. Marshal Hulot dies just three days after re-paying the French Treasury the 200,000 francs Hector's Algerian scheme netted. At the time of his death, de Forzheim was newly-engaged to Bette Fischer. His death proves to be Bette's final undoing as without Marshal Hulot's money, Bette has no means of gaining control over Adeline and the others.

Mademoiselle Olympe Bijou

Olympe Bijou is a 16 year-old girl and a working acquaintance of Josépha Mariah. Another very pretty girl, Mademoiselle Bijou also has the distinction of being the fourth of Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy's mistresses. Olympe enters into a living arrangement with Hulot at the suggestion of Josépha Mariah. Hulot then changes his name to Monsieur Thoul. Backed by funds given to Mariah by her lover the Duke d'Hérouville, Olympe Bijou owns a small embroidery business which Hulot oversees. Some time later, Hulot leaves Bijou and she falls in with a pimp named Idamore. Shortly thereafter, Hulot leaves Mademoiselle Bijou for Élodie, the pimp's sister. Eventually, Olympe Bijou becomes the lawful wife of a Monsieur Grenouville.



Objects/Places

Paris

The capital city of France.

Père Lachaise

A world-renowned cemetery located in Paris, France.

The Louvre

Famous museum located in Paris.

Versailles

Site of the imperial palace of King Louis XIV.

The Tuileries

Once a royal palace of French monarchs, the Tuileries is famous for its gardens.

Algiers

The largest city and capital of modern-day Algeria in northern Africa.

Oran

A city located on the northwestern coast of Algeria.

The Vosges

A region in northeastern France.

Alsace

Alsace is a small region in France. It is located on the eastern border of France and Germany.



The Pont de la Concorde

A bridge located in Paris that spans the Seine River.

Quai d'Orsay

The Quai d'Orsay is part of the Left Bank of the Seine River in Paris.

La Place du Châtelet

A famous public square in Paris located on the Right Bank of the Seine River.

The Rocher de Cancale

A famous Parisian restaurant.

Notre Dame Cathedral

Also known as Notre Dame de Paris. A cathedral in Paris noted for its Gothic architecture.

The Vatican

The seat of the Roman Catholic Church. Vatican City is located in Rome, Italy and functions as an autonomous, self-governing territory.

Sciarra Palace

A palace in Italy, designed by distinguished architect Flaminio Ponzio.

Mohican

A Native American person belonging to the Mohawk Nation.

The Book of Genesis

The first book in the Bible. The Book of Genesis contains the Creation Story of Adam and Eve.



Mesopotamia

An ancient region in the Middle East. Mesopotamia was primarily located in what is now Iraq.

Brittany

A region in northwestern France.



Themes

Jealousy

Jealousy is at the heart of Lisbeth Fischer's struggle to bring low her cousin Adeline Hulot and her entire family. Bette begins the story as unrefined and eccentric in a rather coarse and unbecoming way. Adeline is beautiful and kind; she marries a successful man and lives in fine style in Paris. Bette's jealousy of Adeline's seeming overabundance of good fortune is what motivates her actions and drives her internal monologue. Even when Baron Hulot's affairs with various young women continue to severely erode the family's financial status, Bette proves that jealousy can eat a person alive if it is nurtured and cultivated over a number of years. Bette goes out of her way to manipulate others into her debt. She forms relationships with key players like Madame Marneffe and Monsieur Crevel in order to fill her pockets and feed her plan. Cousin Bette is also adept at gathering information and using it as ammunition at a later date. Although it can be said that Bette's fortunes turn for the better, her infantile obsession with Adeline's destruction nonetheless consumes most of her mental energy. Jealousy is single in its focus on the object of its ire. Bette Fischer's singularity of purpose obstructs her view of the larger picture. She fails to realize that by devoting herself to Adeline's downfall, she is robbing herself of the kind of life she so badly wants. Cousin Bette is never redeemed. Her jealousy eventually comes to nothing and she dies a painful death without fulfilling her goal.

Valérie Marneffe is another character in the Fischer-Hulot circle of friends who is plagued by jealousy. Madame Marneffe's jealousy stems from her acquisitive nature. That is to say, Valérie Marneffe collects men and their affections and makes a profit on it. The more men Madame Marneffe acquires, the more money she makes and the more attention she commands. Madame Marneffe's lust causes her to view Wenceslas as someone to be conquered. Her jealousy mirrors Bette Fischer's in that the root of their hatred is the Hulot family and their perceived superiority. Valérie's jealousy also closely resembles that of Hector Hulot and Monsieur Crevel. Each character feels the need to possess another person physically and emotionally, and will stop at nothing to have what they want. Valérie Marneffe's last conquest is Count Wenceslas Steinbock, the husband of Hortense Hulot. Before Madame Marneffe is even introduced to Steinbock, she is already intimately involved with Baron Hulot, Monsieur Crevel and Henri Montès de Montejanos. By winning Wenceslas away from Hortense, even for a short while, Valérie Marneffe perceives that the affair with Wenceslas means Hortense's defeat.

Self-Sacrifice

The theme of self-sacrifice is woven throughout the entire narrative. The prime example of the characteristic of self-sacrifice is Baroness Adeline Fischer Hulot. Adeline sacrifices her personal health and happiness for love of her philandering husband,



Baron Hector Hulot d'Ervy. Adeline, a devoutly religious woman, holds herself to an unreasonably high standard of conduct. She tells herself that she is better than other women who are jealous and controlling. Adeline takes the moral high ground by listening to Hector's repeated confessions, in which he admits his wrongdoings. Time and time again, Hector Hulot throws himself at his wife's feet in fits of tears and self-pity. Adeline never confronts her husband for cheating on her with other women. She convinces herself that true love means giving up a significant portion of the self. Adeline does not complain when her husband flees from her and their home without notice. Interestingly, however, Adeline Hulot frequently becomes so overwhelmed by repressing her feelings that she suffers severe headaches and palsy. In a literal sense, the Baroness Hulot's nerves eventually frazzle as a result of standing by while her husband ruins her life and the lives of his children. Adeline is a martyr in the classic sense. Hector's behavior, while unacceptable to other women, has the opposite effect on Adeline. With every slight to her dignity and station in life, Adeline digs in her heels and continues to hope that Hector will recover his senses. Adeline knows that if she steadfastly continues to love Hector, he will change. Ironically, Adeline's rigid passivity eventually works against her in the same way Cousin Bette's jealousy works against that character. Baron Hulot tells Agathe Piquetard the kitchen-maid that Adeline does not have long to live and that Mademoiselle Piquetard could become a Baroness. Having overheard this, Adeline suffers a debilitating attack of nerves and dies three days later: "The desperateness of vice had vanquished the patience of the angel." On her deathbed, Adeline admits to giving up her life for Hector. Adeline's extreme behavior has only a short-term impact on Hector's actions. Until the moment of her death, Baroness Adeline Fischer Hulot clings fiercely to the irrational hope that her husband will someday change. Adeline waits more than 25 years for Hector to recognize all the pain and humiliation he causes her. Adeline's heart's desire is that Hector will repent and come back to the fold. This dream never comes true.

Greed and Appetite

The characters in Balzac's novel are all motivated by a range of appetites. Even Adeline Hulot, whose charitable and compassionate nature sets her apart, still allows herself to be driven by an appetite for suffering. In the case of other characters, appetite is a physical, primal kind of force. The intrigues of Baron Hulot, Monsieur Crevel and Valérie Marneffe are related insofar as each character is operating according to his or her most base desires. These three characters share the experience of being entangled in intimate relationships featuring a sizable financial component. Hundreds of thousands of francs change hands between these individuals during the course of the narrative. Baron Hulot pursues women out of a lust for possession and sheer desire of the flesh. Hulot's appetite for female attention outside his marriage drives him to the point of total bankruptcy. His need and hunger for the company of women other than his wife hounds Baron Hulot his entire adult life. He single-handedly ruins not only his own life but the lives of Adeline and their children. Just three days after Adeline's death, Hector flees Paris with Mademoiselle Agathe Piquetard, the family's kitchen-maid.



Monsieur Crevel and Count Wenceslas Steinbock eventually succumb to the same lust and both men are subsequently punished for it. Monsieur Crevel keeps mistresses because he would like his daughter Célestine to inherit his wealth. Crevel admits a preference for money over romantic attachments in the beginning, and he marries Valérie Marneffe for reasons other than love. Crevel remains engaged in his own process of having his revenge on Baron Hulot for stealing Josépha Mariah from him. Crevel's marriage to the nefarious Madame Marneffe is a sign that Crevel wins the ultimate battle with Hulot. Valérie is a formidable prize in Crevel's estimation and winning out over Hulot, Steinbock and Montejanos is the jewel in Crevel's crown.

His happiness does not last, however, and Célestin Crevel is poisoned by Madame de Saint-Estève (alias Madame Nourrison) soon after he and Valérie are wed. Next, Wenceslas loses his wife Hortense and their son for three years because of his shameless activities with Madame Marneffe. He is eventually welcomed back into the family around the time of Adeline Hulot's death. However, after the collapse of his affair with Madame Marneffe, Wenceslas quickly falls into his old habits. Count Steinbock becomes a very lazy artist with a very wealthy wife. Wenceslas does, however, remain faithful to Hortense.

Madame Marneffe's lust is both physical and material. Another important factor to consider is Valérie's unmitigated greed. Married to a clerk in the War Office, Valérie yearns for more money, more status and more freedom from conventional customs. Madame Marneffe plays the role of the innocent young wife who is just pretty enough to garner attention wherever she goes. Her greed and lust fuel one another and her (unspoken) profession becomes keeping the company of men and charging them for their time. Although she is initially married to Marneffe, his own proclivities prevent keep him spinning in the circle of appetite as well. His desire and depravity gnaw away at his insides. In the end, Monsieur Marneffe, like Bette Fischer, dies of a consumptive ailment. Madame Marneffe's final undoing seems to be her brazen marriage to Monsieur Crevel. As it happens, Valérie Marneffe had done too much damage to prove her redeemable. She dies, like her husband, after being poisoned by the ominously wicked Madame de Saint-Estève.

Style

Point of View

The majority of Balzac's novel is told from the perspective of the omniscient narrator. There are select portions of the narrative which feature a number of short messages and letters written by various characters in the first person. An example of such a letter can be found on page 135. In it, Stidmann writes to Wenceslas of his surprise over Wenceslas being put in jail. Another letter is from Johann Fischer (Adeline's once-wealthy uncle) to Baron Hector Hulot. Found on page 264, Fischer writes to tell the Baron that he (Fischer) does not have the 200,000 francs Hulot wants to borrow. In addition, by including notes written from the characters' perspectives, the author adds another layer to the story itself. Reading a character's thoughts and feelings expressed in his/her own words renders the action of the novel as more than one-dimensional. While the narrator's account of what happens functions primarily to further the plot, including more than one point of view gives the novel more depth and texture.

The omniscient narrator's voice becomes neutral in portions of the text that provide historical and/or political background. The tone of such passages is objective and non-editorial, in contrast to the narrator's point of view, which can be critical and slanted.

Setting

The entire novel takes place in Paris, the capital of France. Part of what gives this novel credibility with its audience is the author's familiarity with the city he writes about. In the Introduction, Michael Tibly refers to *Cousin Bette* as "scenes of Parisian life" (page xx). Also, *Cousin Bette* was initially published in serial form and read by nineteenth-century Parisians. As such, audiences at that time were looking for literary experiences that mirrored their own lives. Thus, it would have been important to Balzac to show his knowledge of the ins and outs of the streets of Paris.

The characters themselves are part of the setting in this novel. For instance, the character of Lisbeth Fischer is intended to bring to mind less refined images of the Lorriane region of France. This information in and of itself works to tell what kind of woman she is and what her temperament is like. Whereas Bette invokes what is coarse and uncivilized about the French countryside, Adeline Hulot represents an altogether different Lorraine. Adeline is springtime and beauty. Bette is hard summers spent under the hot sun, perhaps working on the land.

Also at play in this narrative is Balzac's use of visual details as a way of introducing vital information about the characters. By describing what a particular character's living space looks like, Balzac offers a snapshot of who the character really is. Paris in the nineteenth century was very much a city concerned with appearances. Rich or poor, the characters in *Cousin Bette* are known primarily in terms of looks, dress, and style.



Visual, rather than literal, information tells a more visceral story. At the very beginning of the novel, it is revealed that while the Hulots may have been fashionable and well-to-do at one time, but this is no longer the case. Rather than having the characters engage in a conversation about finances, the author describes the character's surroundings and encourages the reader to put the pieces together.

Language and Meaning

Honoré de Balzac's novel has been translated into English from French. It is impossible to translate such a work into another language with any degree of perfection. First of all, there are French words and phrases which do not have any corresponding terms in English. Secondly, the novel presupposes a reader's more than cursory knowledge of French socio-political and cultural customs and familiarity with European fine art and history. Quite often, the narrator mentions a historical figure or an artist of the time and it is not unreasonable to assume that a nineteenth-century French reader would have felt comfortable with such information.

Part of the narrative contains language of colonization as Hector involves himself in a scheme to embezzle money from the French government's interests in Algeria. At the time of Balzac's narrative, the 1840s, the French had been on Algerian soil for roughly ten years. Adeline Hulot's uncle Johann Fischer makes no secret of his dislike of the local officials and the population at large. He openly expresses his hatred in one of his early letters to Hector Hulot. At one point, Fischer refers to a public prosecutor (presumably an Algerian) as a "black-chokered pump" on page 265. In the same paragraph, Johann Fischer begs Hulot not to "abandon [him] to the crows." These two references to skin color are part of the colonizer's rhetoric which affects a mistrust of those whose resources are being coveted.

Structure

Cousin Bette is a novel which is 437 pages in length. It includes a thorough and insightful introduction by Michael Tilby, an American Francophone scholar. Also included is a time line of the significant personal, literary, and historical events in the life of Honoré de Balzac. The time line is an effective tool for modern readers. Primarily, a time line provides snapshots of the world around Balzac and the characters in the novel. These brief glimpses help to ground an analysis of the story in historical fact. In this way, the overall work gains legitimacy as a result of the work being conscious of its specific, individual place in time.

The narrative proper is not divided into chapters. The author does say, however, that the first 148 pages constitute the story's "introduction." The narrator asserts: "[The introduction] is to the drama what the premiss [sic] is to a syllogism, what the prologue is to classical tragedy" (148). In other words, the narrator is telling the reader that it is the introduction to the drama which provides the framework for what goes on within the story itself. The introduction, with its potential for revelation and discovery of basic



unknowns, is what ties together the threads of the greater story. It is surprising, however, that the author chooses to introduce the introduction at the end of such an integral part of the narrative. The result is a feeling of disjointedness. It can also be said that Cousin Bette's "introduction" could also constitute a kind of opening chapter. From another perspective, the narrator's surprising declaration could also serve to build tension and interest in the reader's mind.

The narrative proper is linear for the most part. When it becomes necessary, departures from the main action of the story are usually prefaced with some brief commentary from the narrator. Thus, the reader is made aware that a departure is about to begin. This maintains a sense of flow in the work, and there are no awkward leaps into the past or the future. For example, just before launching into a discussion of who Monsieur Crevel is and what he means to the drama, the narrator says, "Célestin Crevel was a world in himself; and he [...] deserves the honors of the palette by reason of his importance in this domestic drama" (115). The reader knows what is coming next and can prepare for it.



Quotes

"There are certain movements that are so [...] heavy that they are as tell-tale as a register of birth" (5).

"The concierges of Paris have sharp eyes; they do not stop visitors who wear an order, have a blue uniform, and walk ponderously; in short, they know a rich man when they see one" (6).

"[As] she entered the card-room, her face was hidden behind the impenetrable reserve which every woman, even the most candid, seems to have at her command" (8).

"Virtue is always a little too rigid; it overlooks the shades and instincts by help of which we are able to tack when in a false position" (22).

"From the first days of her married life to the present time, the Baroness had loved her husband, as Josephine in the end had loved Napoleon, with an admiring, maternal, and cowardly devotion" (25).

"Two reprobate hussies had been the priestesses of this union planned at some orgy amid the degrading familiarities of two tipsy old sinners" (31).

"Jealousy was the fundamental passion of this character [Bette], marked by eccentricities—a word invented by the English to describe the craziness not of the asylum, but of respectable households" (33)

"[A]s a rule, well-bred though very wicked men are far more attractive and lovable than virtuous men [...]" (51).

"Any one seeing this domestic scene would have found it hard to believe that the father was at his wits' end, the mother in despair, the son anxious beyond words as to his father's future fate, and the daughter on the point of robbing her cousin of her lover" (53).

"[T]he table is the surest thermometer for gauging the income of a Parisian family" (59).

"The ignorance in which the dwellers under one roof can exist as to the social position of their fellow-lodgers is a permanent fact which [...] shows what the rush of Paris life is" (61).

"[W]hile [Wenceslas] deplored the old maid's grasping avarice, his reason bid him prefer her iron hand to the life of idleness and peril led by many of his fellow-countrymen" (65).

"The look with which the Baron rewarded his wife's fanaticism confirmed her in her opinion that gentleness and docility were a woman's strongest weapons" (80).



"Virginity, like every other monstrosity, has its special richness, its absorbing greatness" (111).

"Money never yet missed the smallest opportunity of being stupid" (116).

"A man could not expend more activity, intelligence, and presence of mind in the honest acquisition of a fortune than the Baron displayed in shoving his head into a wasp's nest" (141).

"Hulot could not stand to see his Valérie in a bower of inferior magnificence to the dunghill of gold and pearls owned by a Josépha (151).

"Interests invariably fall assunder in the end, vicious natures can always agree" (153).

"For women, when they have made a sheep of a man, always tell him that he is a lion with a will of iron" (184).

"A few tears rose to Hortense's eyes, and Lisbeth drank them with her eyes as a cat laps milk" (207).

"Nothing annoys a married man so much as finding his wife perpetually interposing between himself and his wishes, however transient" (231)

"The wretch who commits suicide must pay for the opium, the pistol, the charcoal" (246).

"I fear God, but yet more I fear the hell of poverty" (295).



Topics for Discussion

What is the reason for Lisbeth Fischer's hatred of her cousin Adeline?

How does Madame Marneffe manage to single-handedly ruin the Hulot family?

What prompts Monsieur Crevel to agree to lend Adeline Hulot two hundred-thousand francs?

Who is ultimately responsible for the deaths of Célestin Crevel and Valérie Marneffe?

What reason does Josépha Mariah give for helping Adeline Hulot locate her husband?

What is the true nature of the relationship between Monsieur and Madame Marneffe?

Could the narrator's comments about Jews, the Irish, and blacks be considered racist? Why or why not? Use textual examples to support your argument.

Discuss the importance of dowry as it relates to the narrative.

Why is Baroness Hulot unsuccessful in her attempt to seduce Monsieur Crevel?

Give examples to support the claim that the women in Balzac's narrative are more powerful than the men.

Besides his small stature, what distinguishes the Duke d'Hérouville from other wealthy Parisian men who (also) keep mistresses?

What is ironic about the fact that Cousin Bette dies of consumption?

In what way does Baron Hulot change during the course of the story?

Explain the narrative importance of the phrase "five-franc piece."

What is the moral of the story of Cousin Bette and her family?