La Grande Breteche Study Guide

La Grande Breteche by Honoré de Balzac

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Contents

Introduction

Originally published in France in 1842, "La Grande Bretèche" is set in 1830 and describes events that happened in the year 1815 to 1816. This was a turbulent period in France. After the Revolution in 1789, the bourgeoisie, or middle class, struggled to consolidate its power and to retain the political and economic victories it had won over the nobility and the church. By the time of the events of the story, the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte had come and gone, but the old class divisions remained beneath the surface of a new, freer, France.

A member of this new business class himself, Balzac has been praised for his keen insight into the daily lives and inner thoughts of characters not traditionally thought worthy of literary fiction. In "La Grande Bretèche," Balzac's alter ego is the physician Dr. Bianchon. His worldly tone is perfectly suited to Balzac's purposes, and as a member of the new professional class, he blends well with members of the aristocracy (the unseen rich patient he is caring for), as well as with servants and peasants like Madame Lepas and Rosalie.

"La Grande Bretèche" is part of a group of stories called *Another View of Woman* in English, which is itself part of Balzac's encyclopedic work of fiction, La Comedie Humaine, or The Human Comedy. This group of stores is set at a party, after dinner, where different narrators take turns telling stories. Dr. Bianchon's contribution belongs to his "collection of appalling stories," and its gothic setting and suspenseful structure casts a spell over his listeners.

Balzac's story "La Grande Bretèche" represents a miniscule portion of the great author's fictional output. Nonetheless, its narrative momentum, rich detail, and penetrating look into the human condition are characteristic of the prolific nineteenth- century French writer who continues to confound critics even today.

Author Biography

Born in southwestern France in 1799, Honore de Balzac was a man whose temperaments and habits were perfectly suited to the changeable and exuberant age in which he lived. After completing his early education at boarding schools, Balzac studied for law and worked in a notary's office in Paris. Meanwhile, he was also studying literature at the Sorbonne. With his parents' somewhat reluctant support— they paid for a garret for him—he tried his hand at writing. This period, 1819 to 1824, produced a number of unsuccessful and undeveloped philosophical and literary works, but it also proved to be a valuable apprenticeship.

Around the time Balzac was finding his novelist's voice, he also formed the first in a series of close relationships with women from whom he received warmth—and sometimes passion, critical response, and the gift of insight into the female psyche. Balzac met Laurie de Berny when he was 22 years old and she was twice that. Their love affair lasted eight years, but their friendship endured until her death in 1836. He also formed a close, if platonic friendship with a schoolmate of his sister, Zulma Carrud, from whose military officer husband he gathered material about life in the Napoleonic campaigns. The third woman to influence the developing novelist during this period was the Duchess of Abrantes. From her, he gathered entertaining anecdotes on life inside the Imperial court and was introduced to the salons of nobility, which would be reproduced later in *La Comedie.*

After a period of newspaper and hackwork necessitated by financial need, Balzac finally published his first literary worked, *Le Dernier Choan*, which would later become the first volume of *La Comedie Humaine.* This book, though commercially unsuccessful, impressed the literary establishment with its rich rendering of details from ordinary life and its fully drawn characters. "La Grande Bretèche," first published as in a volume of *La Comedie Humaine title Autre Étude de Femme*, or *Another Study of Women* in 1842, shows the full flowering of the new Romantic Movement in Balzac's fiction.

Balzac died a newlywed in his Paris apartment in August of 1850. Despite humble origins, constant financial difficulties, and his irrepressible appetites, he left behind an impressive and lasting literary legacy. His rich personal life informed his fiction, which is still read today.

Plot Summary

The story opens *in media res*, or in the middle of things. Doctor Bianchon is conceding to the other dinner guests' requests that he tell one of the "appalling stories in [his] collection." Noting that the audience had been primed by a previous story, and that the late hour of 2:00 a.m. seemed ideal, the "obliging doctor bowed and silence reigned." The dinner guests then disappear from the story until the final sentences, and Doctor Bianchon tells the story in which he features as much as a listener as a narrator and lets three other storytellers relate the story of "La Grande Bretèche" to his listeners.

Setting the scene, Bianchon describes a dramatically ruined estate just on the outskirts of the town of Vendome, where he was staying to care for a rich patient. Revealing his sensitive, even poetic, nature the doctor reveals that he is so drawn to the "unwritten poetry" and "unrevealed thought" of the ruins that he frequently broke in and sat in the garden where he "wove delightful romances, and abandoned myself to little debauches of melancholy which enchanted me." These romantic reveries are called to a halt, however, when he is visited in his rooms one evening by a mysterious stranger, who introduces himself as Monsieur Regnault.

Regnault is a lawyer, the local notary, whose job is to inform Bianchon that he may longer trespass on the grounds of la Grande Bretèche. Far from dampening Bianchon's curiosity, Regnault's prohibition inspires the doctor to learn more about the decaying house's secret. He does learn from Regnault that the terms of the late Comtesse de Merret's will, delivered to Regnault on her deathbed, forbid any alteration to the property for 50 years following her death. The notary's vivid description of the scene at the lady's deathbed only fuels the doctor's quest to learn more, but Regnault professes ignorance and says "with comical reticence, 'I never allow myself to criticize the conduct of a person who honours me with the gift of a diamond.'" One of the details of the notary's story, the crucifix that the dying woman clutched in her last moment, will prove to be significant when all the elements of the story are revealed.

With his appetite whetted, Bianchon turns to his next storyteller, the wife of his innkeeper, Madame Lepas, and she tells a different part of the story, the beginning. She relates the arrival of the Spanish prisoner, whose name she thinks she remembers as Bagos de Feredia, "a handsome young fellow for a Spaniard, who are ugly they say." She mentions his devotion to his Catholic faith and his silver and ebony crucifix, as well as his mysterious disappearance and the stash of gold left behind (which she and her husband appropriated). She allows that she has always believed "that he had something to do with the business about Madame de Merret."

Madame Lepas's mention of Rosalie, Madame de Merret's former maid who now works for Lepas, leads Bianchon to the brink of discovering the truth. The girl then becomes to him "the very centre of the interest and of the truth; she appeared to [him] to be tied into the knot of it." To get her to give up her secrets, however, he must first seduce her. Apparently Bianchon succeeds (which is revealed in the single line "one evening, or

rather one morning"), because Rosalie does fill in the remainder of the story of Madame de Merret's affair with the young Feredia.

Rosalie tells of the night Monsieur returned home unexpectedly and caught his wife with her lover. Turning the key to enter his wife's room, he thinks he hears the door shut to the closet. When he discovers that Rosalie is not in the closet, as he had at first thought, he realizes what his wife is up to. When his wife denies that there is anyone in there he makes her swear on her crucifix that she is telling the truth. Noticing the unusual craftsmanship of the piece he asks her where she got it. She lies again, claiming she bought it form the jeweler Duvivier, who had in turn bought it from a Spanish monk the prior year.

Having caught his wife in a web of lies, Monsieur de Merret plots his revenge. He summons the servant Gorenflot to arrange for a mason. To his wife's horror, he orders the door to the closet walled up with the Spanish lover trapped inside. Next he pretends to leave the house on an errand and catches his wife in an attempt to free Feredia. And finally, he produces the jeweler from who she claims to have purchased the crucifix. He then remains in his wife's room for the next 20 days while Feredia dies slowly and unaided.

When Bianchon finishes telling his tale, the dinner guests rise and disperse. The effect appears to be most pronounced on the ladies present, as there "were some among them who had almost shivered at the last words."

Characters

Bianchon

Doctor Bianchon is the narrator of this afterdinner tale and the character in the story to whom all the other narrators tell their tales. As the opening of the story reveals, he is known to his dinner companions to have "some appalling stories in [his] collection." He also discloses in his tale that he is a man of refined sensibilities and is susceptible to the romantic powers of certain places and settings.

Duvivier

He is the jeweler from whom Madame de Merret claims to have purchased the distinctive Spanish silver crucifix (which her lover has given her). Monsieur de Merret summons Duvivier to his wife's bedroom and asks him in her presence if he had purchased some Spanish crucifixes, which of course he had not.

Jean Gorenflot

A minor character who performs a major role, Gorenflot is the servant who accepts Monsieur de Merret's bribe to seal the doorway to the closet in which his wife's lover is hiding. He engages the mason and accepts Monsieur's offer of a passport and sufficient cash to marry Rosalie and start a new life.

Madame Lepas

The narrator's landlord and the second narrator in the frame tale, Madame Lepas, supplements Regnault's story about Madame La Merret by introducing the idea that the Spanish nobleman may have been involved somehow. She also mentions the distinctive sliver and black crucifix that eventually unravels the Comtesse's deception.

Monsieur Regnault

He is the local notary and the first of the narrators within the frame tale. He visits Bianchon in his rooms to tell him that he has been trespassing on his occasional visits to the ruined gardens at la Grande Bretèche. When Bianchon asks why, Regnault explains that he late Comtesse de Merret had given him explicit instructions on her deathbed that the estate was to remain untouched and uninhabited for fifty years after her death.

Rosalie

Rosalie is the third narrator from whom Bianchon learns the full story of the mysterious la Grande Bretèche. A former maid for Madame de Merret, Rosalie now works for Madame Lepas and thus is available for Bianchon's inquiries. Though she is "a good girl," according to Monsieur Regnault, Bianchon is apparently able to seduce her in order to elicit more information from her about her former mistress.

Bagos de Feredia

He is the Spanish nobleman who is dead before the story begins. A prisoner of the Napoleonic wars, he was being kept under house arrest in the same inn where Bianchon is now staying. Madame Lepas describes him as handsome and charming, if a little mysterious. When he disappeared inexplicably, she and others assumed that he had drowned. By the end of the story, however, Bianchon, discovers the much more gruesome cause of his death: slow starvation in Madame de Merret's closet.

Comtesse de Merret

Also refered to as Madame de Merret, she is the late inhabitant and last owner of la Grande Bretèche, and the woman whose secrets Bianchon seeks to find out from the storytellers he engages in the story. As the narrative finally reveals, she went to her death with the terrible secret that she had betrayed her husband with her lover, the Spanish nobleman, and then betrayed her lover when she allowed her husband to have him mortared into the closet rather than confess.

Monsieur de Merret

The Comtesse's husband, Mousier de Merret is said to have died in Paris due to the consequences of his excessive living. Bianchon learns later why he would have left his wife and estate in despair: he discovers his wife's adultery with the young Spaniard and cruelly condemns the man to a slow and agonizing death while he and forces his wife to listen or confess.

Themes

Betrayal

One of the most pronounced themes in "La Grande Bretèche" is betrayal. But Balzac resists the impulse to portray the act of betrayal as black and white. Instead, the story offers a complex and nuanced consideration of what it means to betray a vow or another human being. The primary act of betrayal occurs between Madame and Monsieur de Merret, but careful readers will notice how this act spawns several other betrayals as well.

Even the original betrayal is not as simple as it seems at first. Yes, Madame de Merret betrays her husband and her marriage vows by taking the Spanish lover. But it quickly becomes more complicated than that. She betrays her religious faith by making a false vow on the crucifix. Finally, in what is the most horrifying act of betrayal in the story, she betrays her lover by allowing her husband to imprison him in the closet. Ironically, Monsieur de Merret uses the sacredness of his wife's pledge on the cross to silence her efforts to confess her lie and free Feredia, reminding her when she tries to speak during the twenty days it takes for the man to die that she "swore on the cross that no one was there."

From this original betrayal there are many others. Madame Lepas and her husband betray Feredia's last wishes by keeping the money he had asked be donated to the church. Bianchon betrays Rosalie by seducing her just to get information from her. Rosalie betrays the confidence of her former employees by spilling the story to Bianchon. Finally, Bianchon, the dinner guests—and the readers— all betray the wishes of the late Madame de Merret when we trespass on her property both literally in the case of the narrator and figuratively in the case of the listeners.

Men versus Women

Since "La Grande Bretèche" belongs to the group of stories linked together under the title *Another View of Woman*, it is necessary to consider how the theme of men versus women is articulated through the narrative. At the center of the story is the adversarial relationship between Madame and Monsieur de Merret. Their fierce struggle (which almost certainly has a history we cannot know) results in both their deaths as well as the death of the Spanish nobleman. The scene in which the vengeful husband tries to force his wife to give up her secrets is repeated symbolically throughout the story. First, Monsieur Regnault, the notary, describes his encounter with a cryptic and secretive Madame de Merret who reluctantly tells him just enough information to get what she wants from him. Next, the narrator cajoles Madame Lepas into revealing more about the story and more about herself than she had intended.

The most troubling instance of this motif occurs in the exchange between Bianchon and Rosalie, all of which is hidden from the readers. Because he cannot get direct access to the secret of La Grande Bretèche and Madame de Merret, Bianchon must pursue indirect routes and proxies. Having discovered that Rosalie "was at the very centre of the interest and the truth," he launches a campaign to seduce her. Not only does he succeed in his goal of possessing what she knows, he also appropriates her right to tell her own story. Whereas Bianchon has allowed the other narrators, Regnault and Lepas, to speak for themselves, when he gets to Rosalie's part of the tale he intercedes and tells his listeners that he's summarizing what she told him.

The story ends with a final instance of the theme of men versus women. When Bianchon finishes the story, it appears that it has affected the women differently from the men. A new omniscient narrator explains that "all the ladies rose form the table, and thus the spell under which Bianchon has held them was broken." The narrator also mentions that "there were some among them who had almost shivered at the last words," as if this other view of women were too horrifying to contemplate.

Style

Narration: The Frame Tale

"La Grande Bretèche" is a frame tale, a story in which one narrative frames at least one additional narrative. Further complicating matters for the reader is Balzac's penchant for interlocking stories and recurrent characters in the many volumes of work that came to be known as *La Comedia Humaine*. The outer frame of "La Grande Bretèche," part of the structure of the group of stories in *Another View of Woman,* is the scene of a dinner party in which a series of narrators are asked to entertain the group. Dr. Bianchon, who is known to the group as an exceptional storyteller, presents his tale of the secrets of la Grande Bretèche.

Bianchon, though a character in his tale, has no direct access to the story itself. He must rely on three more narrators to reveal the secrets that he pursued during his stay in Vendome. In order for this device to be successful, Bianchon must establish his prowess not just as a teller of tales, but also as a listener or reader of them. In this way he serves as a model of the ideal listener for the members of his audience at the dinner table and as a model reader as well. Two somewhat contradictory features characterize Dr. Bianchon's listening style. On the one hand, as a scientist, he privileges a relentless inquisitiveness that never doubts the knowability of the truth. On the other hand, he reveals a susceptibility to romanticism as well as a tendency to be governed as much by desire as by reason.

Setting: The Gothic Imagination

It is significant that what starts Bianchon on his quest for the truth about the ruined gatehouse and its last living inhabitants is not the spirit of scientific inquiry, but the way the spirit of the place works on his emotions and imagination. In placing at the center of the story a ruined mansion, Balzac establishes a gothic tone which in turn sets up certain expectations in the minds of Bianchon's listeners as well as Balzac's reading audience.

A variety of Romanticism, gothic literature contains certain immediately recognizable features. Readers familiar with Edgar Allan Poe's classic gothic tale "The Fall of the House of Usher" will see the similarities to Balzac's (and Bianchon's) description of the house in "La Grande Bretèche." With its "dreadfully dilapidated" roof, paths "overgrown with purslane," and "balconies hung with swallows' nests," Bianchon hardly has to tell his audience that he felt like "an invisible has written over it all: 'Mystery.'" The scene inspires him to weave "delightful romances" and "little debauches of melancholy," and he claims to find it the ruined garden a source of "unwritten poetry." The gothic image of the ruined mansion which hides a mysterious —even hideous —secret is meant to convey a sense of the limits of human endeavor in the face of nature's relentless

entropy and to remind readers of the fleetingness of mortal existence and to hint at the existence of a supernatural realm beyond.

Historical Context

France after the Revolution

Inspired in part by the American Revolution, the French Revolution in 1789 overthrew the oppressive class and economic structures of the old order. Absolute monarchy, unchallenged power, and privilege of the ruling class, or aristocracy were swept away by the revolution. Though they enlisted the help of the rural peasantry and the urban artisans in the challenge to the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie rather than the poor were the beneficiaries of the revolution. Contemporary historians like Roger Magraw point out, however, that the "triumph of the bourgeoisie was both incomplete and precarious." Much of the land and power that the aristocracy and the church conceded, was regained in subsequent years of governmental change and instability. In Magraw's words: "Yet if the nobles were, along with the clergy, the clear losers from the revolution, French history in the nineteenth century is incomprehensible if one fails to appreciate the strength which they retained."

Though the Revolution accomplished the goal of social change and increased economic opportunity (at least for some), political stability remained elusive. Since the goal of the revolution was to destabilize and decentralize power, revolutionary leaders found it difficult to decide on and install alternative systems of government. Though they had in mind the British model of a constitutional government controlled by a parliament, the current monarch (Louis XVI) proved to be unreceptive to the idea of a constitutional monarchy. Furthermore, continuing unrest among the peasants and artisans who still had not seen many benefits from the revolution, convinced the leading bourgeoisie to consolidate their power. Magraw noted, their "quest for law and order drove them into the arms of a manon- horseback," General Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon had outlasted his welcome and been defeated and banished by 1812, three years before the events in the tale that Dr. Bianchon tells his listeners in "La Grande Bretèche."

Balzac and the Rise of the Middle Class

The first half of the nineteenth century in France was a period of turbulent social and political change. As revolution gave way to counter revolution and then military dictatorship, members of both the old aristocracy and the peasantry found themselves losing ground to an increasingly visible middle class, or bourgeoisie. These new class dynamics are well illustrated in "La Grande Bretèche."

Balzac is well known for portraying the rich texture of the daily lives of the newly visible middle class and for capturing the tensions from below (the peasantry) and above (the aristocracy). In La Grande Bretèche the aristocracy is represented by the morally bereft Madame and Monsieur de Merret and the misguided Feredia Bagos. Dr. Bianchon and his dining companions occupy the roles of the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie. The

peasantry and artisan class is represented by several servants, most prominently by Rosalie, the maid who surrenders her secrets to the doctor.

Critical Overview

Criticism of "La Grande Bretèche" is usually incorporated in the extensive body of work about *La Comedie Humaine* in general. As editor and critic Martin Kanes observes, initial scholarship focused on the details of Balzac himself, on his "headlong, heedless plunging through life." Soon, however, biographical criticism ran its course and more substantive questions about his work began to emerge. This is not to say that critics agreed with each other. Rather, from the moment of Balzac's death in 1850 until the present, critics and readers have argued about the same questions. Kanes suggested that the essential questions about Balzac are these: "Was the master storyteller a brilliant social analyst? A philosophical thinker? A political commentator? A historian? A cultural anthropologist of sorts? Was he a realist? A Romantic? A visionary? A pre-Marxist Marxist? A pre-Freudian Freudian?" Though Kanes concedes that "In the end, Balzac criticism is paradoxical and suggestive because it is a response to a body of work that is itself paradoxical and suggestive," he still identifies several major periods of Balzac criticism.

The first period of criticism on Balzac's work began as soon as he began publishing under his own name and continued until his death. The chief concern of critics and readers of this period was, besides biographical details, whether Balzac was primarily a realist, a chronicler of his times, or primarily a philosopher whose fiction, in Kanes's words, "was merely the vehicle by which he expressed a metaphysical view of man and the world." This division among critics became consolidated during the second major period of Balzac scholarship. The period 1850 to 1900 is dominated by the Great Debate, as it has come to be known.

The third major period of Balzac scholarship, 1900 to 1950, departed from the two-sided debate of the previous era. Critics of this age became more concerned with the political dimensions of Balzac's work and with its explicit literary qualities. By this time Balzac's work had gained the attention of academics in America, and these scholars were often as interested in Balzac's ability to render reality as they were in his adherence to literary standards.

The fourth major period of Balzac criticism extends from the 100th anniversary of his death to our own age. With the publication of a volume of critical essays to mark to centenary of Balzac's death, the old debate over whether he was philosopher or a realist resurfaced. But new ways of thinking about literary texts in recent decades has enriched Balzac scholarship by adding feminist, marxist, and psychoanalytical perspectives as well, to name a few. Furthermore, as Kanes notes, a kind of metacriticsim has also developed: "criticism and analysis of Balzac scholarship and criticism itself."

Balzac's contribution to literature goes beyond academic criticism. He has also influenced and inspired other major writers of fiction. In French literature, his obvious successor is Marcel Proust, and he inspired a whole school of realists such as Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert. Students of American literature will be interested to know

that Balzac was a powerful influence on landmark American novelists Henry James and William Faulkner.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches American literature and directs the writing center at Southwestern University in Texas. She writes frequently about the modern short story. In this essay, Piedmont- Marton discusses how Dr. Bianchon's narrative is driven by a cycle of seduction and betrayal.

The last lines in "La Grande Bretèche" close the frame of the narrative by returning to the scene of the dinner party where the narrator, Dr. Bianchon, has graciously complied with requests to tell one of his infamous tales. In the closing lines of the story, an omniscient narrator intrudes to mention that at the conclusion of Bianchon's tale "all the ladies rose from the table," and "some among them . . . had almost shivered at the last words." As readers of Balzac's tale, we are also present, by proxy, at that table. Even as we rise from our seats at the "table," however, questions linger: why does Bianchon's tale have such a chilling effect on his listeners, and why does it seem to have affected the women so much more intensely? A close reading of the story suggests that it's not only the nature of the secret of "La Grande Bretèche" (Madame de Merret's adultery and her husband's cruelty), but also the manner in which our narrator uncovers and discloses that secret—a dynamic of seduction and betrayal—that causes the women to shiver and "the spell under which Bianchon had held them" to be broken. Not only is the story about seduction, betrayal, and their consequences, but also the structure of the narrative itself depends upon a similar cycle of seduction and betrayal.

The reader plays a very important role in Balzac's fiction, and especially in "La Grande Bretèche." Literary critic Mary Susan McCarthy explains that in this story "the audience is represented in the narration itself." Balzac, she goes on to explain, "has projected between himself and his reader several other readers who form links in a chain connecting the author to us through his text. The complicated structure of the tale constructs an axis, at the poles of which are narrator and narrataire, speaker and listener, performer and audience, and, by extension, Balzac and his reader." But these categories are unstable, however, as Bianchon acts as both teller of the tale and listener to other narrators. "Bianchon's position in the narration is problematical," Peter Lock cautions, "On the one hand he is the sender, insofar as he is recounting one of the stories from his repertoire to a group of listeners; on the other hand he is the receiver of three narratives which he does no more than repeat, although he admits there has been some editing, some 'abridgement.'" Readers of the tale, similarly, become more than passive listeners; instead, like several of the characters in the story, they are enlisted —or seduced —into helping shape and frame the tale.

Following Bianchon's example of the ideal listener, readers of "La Grande Bretèche" find themselves drawn into a dynamic of desire. From the first glimpse (through Dr. Bianchon's eyes) of the ruined house upon which "an invisible hand has written all over it: 'Mystery,'" readers share the narrator's desire to penetrate its secrets. The engine that drives the story is desire. In McCarthy's words, "The movement of "La Grande Bretèche" hinges upon the desire of the recipients represented in the text, and the

structure depends on this element for its effectiveness." The key to the story is Bianchon's insatiable and unscrupulous desire and our complicity in it.

Bianchon regards the ruined house itself as an object of desire, and when he is denied its pleasures directly he must seek other means of possessing it and entering into its inner chamber. Describing the effect the house and garden had on him, Bianchon uses the language of romance and seduction. The sight of the house becomes one of his "keenest pleasures," and it's where he invents "delightful romances" and indulges in "debauches." When Monsieur Regnault turns up one night to inform him that he has been trespassing —that his advances have been unwanted, the notary soon takes on the role a fellow suitor. When he realizes that he will never be able to compete with Regnault's claim to possess Madame de Merret's intimate secrets —the notary proudly wears the diamond she gave him on her deathbed after all —Bianchon adopts a different tactic: flattering or seducing the notary into giving up what he knows. Having appealed to Regnault's inflated sense of his own importance, Bianchon succeeds in loosening "the tongue of the discreet notary of Vendome." But when he relates this story to his listeners (and readers) he doesn't disguise his manipulation of Regnault in pursuit of his own aim to possess the secret of la Grande Bretèche. Though Regnault seems to derive pleasure from having a willing audience despite the fact that he's being used, this scene establishes Bianchon's own pattern of seduction and betrayal in pursuing the secrets of seduction and betrayal hidden in the ruins of la Grande Bretèche.

Having gotten all he could from Regnault, Bianchon then turns his attention to Madame Lepas. As the second narrator in the tale within a tale, Madame Lepas's job is to relate the events that happened prior to the deathbed scene described by Regnault. Madame Lepas's tongue is more easily loosened, but Bianchon is not above manipulating her into divulging more than she thinks she should. Bianchon is able to take advantage of her by recognizing that she wants something from him. Madame Lepas comes to his room to find out what Regnault has told him. Her demeanor is a "happy compromise between the instinct of a police constable, the astuteness of a spy, and the cunning of a dealer." What she wants is to determine if the notary knows anything about the fifteen thousands francs she stashed away after the disappearance of the Spanish nobleman, which ultimately brought about the death of both de Merrets and the ruin of la Grande Bretèche. She also wants to confess, and believes that the socially superior Dr. Bianchon possesses the kindness and moral gravity to put her conscience at ease. Dr. Bianchon, of course, is all too willing to give her what she wants in exchange for more pieces of the story, all the while making her feel like he's doing her a favor. With Madame Lepas he strikes a deal: she gets reassurance that no one knows about the stolen money and he gets one step closer to the secret of Madame de Merret's bedroom.

From Madame Lepas, Bianchon learns one more crucial piece of information: Rosalie used to work for Madame de Merret. Therefore she comes to represent for the doctor, "the very centre of the interest and of the truth," she contains "the last chapter of a romance." Bianchon decides to use his skills at seduction to compel Rosalie to give up what she knows. In this case, however, he realizes that he'll need to literally seduce her. To his scheming eyes, she "was soon possessed of every charm that desire can lend to

a woman in whatever rank of life." Significantly, however, Bianchon chooses to obscure the details of this the most important of his conquests. Listeners and readers alike only know about Bianchon's means of acquiring Rosalie's confidence by the allusive aside in this sentence: "A fortnight after the notary's visit, one evening, or rather one morning, in the small hours, I said to Rosalie. . . ." Bianchon's appropriation of Rosalie's body is completed and symbolized in his appropriation of her voice. Whereas he has allowed his other two narrators to tell their tales directly, he silences Rosalie, claiming that it's only necessary for him "to relate it in as few words as may be." Thus Bianchon ultimately claims the story as his own, casting new light on his claim at the opening of the tale to possess a "collection" of "appalling stories."

Dr. Bianchon's story is as much about his ability to get what he wants as it is about the tragedy of "La Grande Bretèche." Balzac shows that the machinery of narrative is driven by the engine of desire, but he also suggests, through the character of Bianchon, that desire can sometimes become its own end. Readers are left to wonder why some of the ladies at the table "shivered" when the doctor finishes telling his tale. Is it out of sympathy for Madame de Merret? For the martyred Spanish lover? Or perhaps because they recognize this "other view of woman" is an all too familiar pattern of seduction, betrayal, and silencing of women by men who wish to *possess*and appropriate them.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

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Balzac's short story "La Grande Bretèche" is as much about storytelling itself as it is about the content of the story it tells. "La Grande Bretèche" is structured by multiple layers of *embedded narratives.* The*frame narrator*, who introduces and concludes the story, is an unnamed guest at a dinner party during which the central story is told. The *central narrator* is the doctor Monsieur Bianchon, who tells his story to the other dinner guests. Within Bianchon's story, however, are three embedded narratives: that of the executor, that of the innkeeper, and that of the maid at the inn. Through this layering of narratives, Balzac's story focuses on the human passion for telling stories and revealing secrets, the pleasure and art of storytelling, the role of mystery in inspiring the weaving and telling of tales, and the individual narrative style of each storyteller.

A. W. Raitt has noted that Balzac's short stories tend to be similarly structured around the introduction of a mystery or enigma and the gradual revelation of the cause of that mystery or enigma: "Mystery and suspense are essential ingredients of almost all Balzac's tales, and his favourite method of constructing a short story is to propose some enigma at the outset, develop it so as to increase the tension, and then suddenly reveal the solution." "La Grande Bretèche" is a prime example of this story structure. Furthermore, the existence of a mystery, enigma or secret are demonstrated in this story to be precisely the seed from which stories grow. In this case, the central narrator, Bianchon, is inspired to spin a variety of narrative webs from his observations of the grand and mysterious Grande Bretèche house and garden which have been abandoned and left to overgrow. The narration ties the writing of stories to the presence of mystery in Bianchon's summation of his description of la Grande Bretèche: "An invisible hand has written over it all: 'Mystery.'" Bianchon describes the process by which the discovery of a mystery leads to speculation as to the *story* behind that mystery: "What fire from heaven can have fallen there? By what decree has salt been sown on this dwelling? Has God been mocked here? Or was France betrayed? These are the questions we ask ourselves. Reptiles crawl over it, but give no reply. This empty and deserted house is a vast enigma of which the answer in known to none." Bianchon revels in the opportunity which enigma provides for the workings of the imagination to create stories in order to explain its mystery. In fact, the pleasure of storytelling (even to oneself) is dependent on the existence of mystery; as Bianchon points out, an excess of factual knowledge limits the imagination's potential for creating stories.

Bianchon states that, "the sight of this strange dwelling became one of my keenest pleasures." He notes, however, that a historic building or site which suggests "indisputable authenticity" does not make for good storytelling: "Was it not far better than a ruin? Certain memories of indisputable authenticity attach themselves to a ruin; but this house, still standing, though being slowly destroyed by an avenging hand, contained a secret, an unrevealed thought." Thus, it is the indication of a "secret" which

provides the storyteller with the raw material for building a narrative. Bianchon even asserts that he pointedly avoided asking any of the local inhabitants, "any gossiping native," for an explanation of the house's mystery; for such information would have cost him "the price of the story to which this strange scene no doubt was due." Without the limitations of any further information, the storyteller is free to "enchant" himself by "weaving delightful romances," out of the "unwritten poetry" afforded by the presence of the enigma. As it is, the storyteller is free to imagine a variety of "dramas," as Bianchon describes his imagining of "a gloomy drama to account for this monumental woe."

The central role of "mystery" to storytelling is again referred to when the first of three narrators whose stories are embedded in Bianchon's enters his room at the inn "with an air of mystery." Monsieur Regnault, the executor of the will of the former owner of la Grande Bretèche, offers Bianchon "the truth on official authority" of the abandoned house. Fearing the loss of mystery will ruin the drama of la Grande Bretèche, Bianchon is reluctant to "bid farewell to my beautiful reveries and romances." However, Bianchon fully appreciates the exquisite pleasure of the storyteller when given (or taking) the opportunity to tell his tale. Bianchon describes this pleasure in terms of the "passion" and "delight" afforded by the "hobby" of storytelling. When he invites Monsieur Regnault to tell him about the house:

"At these words an expression, which revealed all the pleasure which men feel who are accustomed to ride a hobby, overspread the lawyer's countenance. He pulled up the collar of his shirt with an air, took out his snuffbox, opened it, and afforded me a pinch; on my refusing, he took a large one. He was happy! A man who has no hobby does not know all the good to be got out of life. A hobby is the happy medium between a passion and a monomania.'

While Bianchon compiles his own version of the story from the fragments provided by the three embedded narrators, each narrator has her or his own *style* of storytelling, which is suited to individual personalities and occupations. As Raitt has pointed out, "La Grande Bretèche plays off three styles one against another: the pompous legalistic phraseology of the lawyer, the familiar, homely accents of the hostess, and the lively but acutely observant narrative of Bianchon." Monsieur Regnault, for instance, catches himself lapsing into a form of "legalese" in his explanations of Madame Merret's will. As he is explaining to Bianchon what became of the household items at la Grande Bretèche, Regnault states that, "Some people even say that she had burnt all the furniture, the hangings-in short, all the chattels and furniture whatever used in furnishing the premises now let by the said M.— (Dear! what am I saying? I beg your pardon, I thought I was dictating a lease.)" In describing what was left of the furniture of the house by the time Regnault saw it, he again describes the contents of the house in terms of an official "inventory": "That was all the furniture; not enough to fill ten lines in an inventory." And again, in explaining to Bianchon the contents of Madam Merret's will, Regnault uses legalese: "Otherwise la Grande Bretèche reverts to the heirs-at-law, but on condition of fulfilling certain conditions set forth in a codicil to the will, which is not to be opened till the expiration of the said term of fifty years." Bianchon, nonetheless, makes a point of complimenting Regnault on his storytelling skills, and particularly the effect of his description of Madame Merret on her deathbed: "'Monsieur,' I said in conclusion,

'you have so vividly impressed me that I fancy I see the dying woman whiter than her sheets; her glittering eyes frighten me; I shall dream of her to-night . . .'" However, Bianchon describes to the listeners of *his*story, the boring quality of Regnault's narrative style:

However, I soon loosened the tongue of the discreet notary of Vendome, who communicated to me, not without long digressions, the opinions of the deep politicians of both sexes whose judgments are law in Vendome. But these opinions were so contradictory, so diffuse, that I was near falling asleep in spite of the interest I felt in this authentic history. The notary's ponderous voice and monotonous accent, accustomed no doubt to listen to himself and make himself listened to by his clients or fellow-townsmen, were too much for my curiosity. Happily, he soon went away.

The widespread urge to tell stories, and universal pleasure humans take in storytelling are indicated by Bianchon's mention of the local "gossip" inspired by the mystery of la Grande Bretèche. Gossip is a form of condensed storytelling shared among a community of people, whose passion for telling tales is equally inspired by the presence of mystery. Regnault explains that, almost as soon as he was summoned by Madame Merret to execute her will, "That very night, though it was already late, all the town knew that I was going to Merret." Rumor, like gossip, is equally inspired by the passion for telling "tales"; as Regnault explains, "From the rumours that were current concerning this lady (Monsieur, I should never end if I were to repeat all the tales that were told about her), I had imagined her a coquet."

The second narrator embedded within Bianchon's narrative is Madame Lepas, the landlady of the inn. Bianchon captures both the passion for telling stories, and the urge to reveal "secrets" which inspires storytelling in his description of Madame Lepas's countenance at the prospect of revealing to him her piece of the mystery; "your eyes are big with secret," he tells her.

Balzac wonderfully illustrates what seems to be a universal storytelling technique; the art of initiating the telling of a story is characterized by the storyteller's pretense to withholding the very story she or he is bursting to tell. This art, or artifice, is aptly demonstrated by Bianchon, in arousing the interest of his fellow dinner guests, causing them to virtually beg him to tell them the story of la Grande Bretèche, which he clearly takes no end of delight in telling. As Balzac's story opens, one dinner guest has just finished telling a story, and Bianchon artfully introduces his own story by teasing his listeners with the implication that this is not necessarily the proper time or occasion for him to tell such a story:

"Ah! Madame," replied the doctor, "I have some appalling stories in my collection. But each one has its proper hour in conversation . . ." "But it is two in the morning, and the story of Rosina has prepared us," said the mistress of the house. "Tell us, Monsieur Bianchon!" was the cry on every side.

As do each of his three embedded narrators, Bianchon makes a ceremonial gesture of preparation in order to focus the attention of his listeners before launching into his tale: "The obliging doctor bowed, and silence reigned."

Just as Bianchon teases his fellow dinner guests with the false expression of reluctance in order to arouse their interest in his story, so does Madame Lepas pretend to a reluctance to reveal the secret she claims to guard so closely, but which she clearly delights in telling. When asked by Bianchon what she can tell him about the mystery of la Grande Bretèche, she first declares that, "'I know nothing about it.'" When Bianchon replies that, "I am sure you know everything," she does not hesitate to give in, responding that, "I will tell you the whole story." She further demonstrates both her skill in the art of storytelling, and her eagerness to tell such a story, in her artifice of protest against the revelation of the secret, and her assurance that he is being given exclusive knowledge of the mystery:

"Up to now I have never dared to say a word to people of these parts; they are all chatter-mags, with tongues like knives. And never till now, sire, have I had any traveller here who stayed so long in the inn as you have, and to whom I could tell the history of the fifteen thousand francs—"

But Bianchon comments to his listeners that, "Her eagerness made me suspect that I was not the only person to whom my worthy landlady had communicated the secret of which I was to be sole possessor, but I listened."

The human passion for hearing, as well as for telling, tales is wonderfully expressed through Bianchon's focus upon Rosalie, the maid at the inn whom he suspects can reveal to him, "the heart of this solemn story, this drama which had killed three people." His desire to hear the end of the tale is metaphorically expressed through the desire he focuses upon Rosalie. He states that, "Rosalie became in my eyes the most interesting being in Vendome." His desire to learn "the whole history of la Grande Bretèche" is so strong that he will go so far as to "make love to Rosalie if it proves necessary" to "achieve this end." Bianchon's statement that the "last chapter" in the "romance" of the story of la Grande Bretèche is "contained" in Rosalie equates the human passion for stories with the passion of a man set on seducing an attractive young woman: "It was not a case for ordinary lovemaking; this girl contained the last chapter of a romance, and from that moment all my attentions were devoted to Rosalie." As representative of the "romance" of the story, Bianchon finds that Rosalie for him "was soon possessed of every charm that desire can lend to a woman in whatever rank of life."

When Bianchon finally does induce Rosalie to tell him "the last chapter" of the story, she, like all of the other narrators, makes a pretense of reluctance to reveal the "secret," and, just as quickly, launches into the telling of her tale with dramatic ceremony and unabashed passion. When Bianchon first asks her, she immediately replies, "'do not ask me that, Monsieur Horace!'" However, without so much as a word of encouragement from Bianchon, she agree to tell him, but with the understanding that he will "'keep the secret carefully.'" Like all of the storytellers in Balzac's tale, Rosalie pretends to be revealing a well-kept secret to an exclusively privileged listener; and, as do all of the

listeners (and potential storytellers), Bianchon swears to keep the secret, all the while knowing that he will reveal it with little provocation to the next potential listener. As do all of the narrators, Rosalie ceremoniously prepares to launch into her story: "Thereupon she set her head-kerchief straight, and settled herself to tell the tale; for there is no doubt a particular attitude of confidence and security is necessary to the telling of a narrative." Rosalie's narrative style in turn differs from each of the previous narrators. Bianchon describes her narrative in terms which befit the storytelling style of an eager young woman:

"If I were to reproduce exactly Rosalie's diffuse eloquence, a whole volume would scarcely contain it. Now, as the event of which she gave me a confused account stands exactly midway between the notary's gossip and that of Madame Lepas, as precisely as the middle term of a rule-of-three sum stands between the first and third, I have only to relate it in a few words as may be. I shall therefore be brief.'

In contrast to the three less-than-scintillating storytellers embedded in his narrative, Bianchon's storytelling style is represented by the frame narrator of Balzac's story as eminently skillful and effective. Bianchon demonstrates a fine sense of the importance of atmosphere to the effective telling of tales; he twice expresses the opinion that stories are best told late in the evening, and preferably over dinner. In introducing Rosalie's segment of the narrative, which Bianchon has pointedly elicited late at night, or, rather, in the "small hours" of the morning, Bianchon asserts that, "The best tales are told at a certain hour—just as we are all here at table. No one ever told a story well standing up, or fasting." Finally, the frame narrator indicates the effectiveness of Bianchon's storytelling style in the final lines of *his* story; he describes Bianchon's guests as that of holding them under a "spell" during the course of his narration.

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

In the following article, Lock examines the psychoanalytic approach to literature and the need for critics and readers to find meaning in stories that ofter have meaning imposed on them by the author

Readers of modern authors (Joyce, Kafka, Borges) are accustomed to becoming Egyptologists, undergoing what Deleuze has called "an apprenticeship in signs." We have been initiated into the impenetrable and interminable through the decoding of modern texts. In *The Genesis of Secrecy* Frank Kermode suggests that all great works have about them an air of the opaque, the enigmatic and the unknowable, and that it is we who are tempted to confer upon them some structure and meaning without which our lives would be unendurable: "This is the way we satisfy ourselves with explanations of the unfollowable world—as if it were a structured narrative, of which more might be said by trained readers of it, by insiders. World and book, it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them, aware of their arbitrariness and impenetrability, knowing they may be narratives only because of our imprudent intervention, and susceptible of interpretation only by our hermetic tricks." Such scepticism is salutary, particularly for readers of early nineteenth-century fiction where rhetoric and narration tend to *impose* meaning on the world and thence on the reader, and to represent the past as followable and knowable. A Balzac, for example, wills to present total meaning as accessible to a single consciousness, that of the omniscient narrator, and transmissible to the reader who comes to live the world as a transparently knowable totality—replica of a unity and mirror of a continuity which he himself possesses. "[Balzac] ne cache rien, il dit tout," writes Proust impatiently; but this quick reaction is at once contested: "Aussi est-on étonné de voir que cependant il y a de beaux effets de *silence* dans son oeuvre. . . . 'Vous connaissez Rastignac? Vrai?. . . .'"

Acting on Proust's astonishment (itself astonishing to traditional Balzac readers accustomed to paying their money in exchange for the Whole Truth), I propose, through the reading of one of Balzac's short texts, *La Grande Bretèche*, to inves- tigate the question of the secret and its troubling, silencing effect on narrative. Recent theorizing by the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (in *Le Verbier de l'Homme aux loups* and *L'Ecorce et le noyau*) compels us to become attentive to modes of encoding secrets in discourse and to strategies of *defense* which a text may adopt in order to mislead the reader. Particularly suggestive for readers of fiction is an elaboration of Melanie Klein's views on phantasy which Abraham and Torok interpret as a defensive "language" whereby the subject plots, narcissistically, to protect the ego against the exigencies and pressures of psychic conflict. Phantasy, in this reading, far from revealing the "truth" of psychic reality, blocks its working out, and is opposed to introjection and symbolization—those processes by which the subject re-situates and re-presents conflict with a view to resolution. At issue is the Janus-like stance of representation with respect to origin of conflict and articulation in language. In brief, what can discourse take in and how does it go about "taking in" the reader?

Although at first glance there seems nothing that the Balzacian text cannot comprehend, organize and totalize, the reader of the *Comédie humaine* becomes increasingly aware that the resolute forward march of Balzac's writing, motivated (in the words of one of his titles) by the Quest for the Absolute, seems frequently driven onwards by the presence of a *secret* which, as prior occurrence, haunts the text and causes its insistent, even frenzied, forward movement to be doubled by anxious recursions towards the past. The form of the Balzacian text is often akin to that of the detective story where narrative retraces or re-enacts an event which is presumed already to have taken place; the plot is the effect of an unknown cause, some act or story already encountered. Todorov, finding a similar figuration in the novellas of Henry James, describes it as '*"the quest for an absolute and absent cause";* the narrative strategy consists of "the search for, the pursuit of, this initial cause" which Todorov finally names, vaguely, as "this primal essence." In James' case the "essence" in question is usually death which is both sought and masked by the process of narrative; and since death can never be known or represented, the meaning of the story lies not in revelation but in the quest itself, a quest in which "the essential is absent, the absent is essential."

Although Todorov's analysis of individual texts is instructive, the reader may well feel somewhat let down by the solution; it is as if the critic-detective knew the answer all the time and, like James himself, rather enjoys titillating only to deceive. Readers of Balzac would certainly not be content with such a refined pleasure; they like to think their man isn't going to let them down: the omniscient author (or a privileged stand-in like Dr. Bianchon), acting like some precursive amalgam of Sigmund Freud and Sherlock Holmes, watchful, waiting, secure in a place of knowing, knowing his place, will surely, by means of some incisive flash-back or some melodramatic unmasking, reveal the truth of the enigma, the riddle's *mot*. And often it is just so. Very frequently, unmaskings and revelations take place with great dispatch; and the *speed* of Balzac's endings (*Facino Cane, Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu, La Fille aux yeux d'or, L'Enfant maudit*, for example), contribute to the air of finality, the sense of proper execution. Yet the reader may, as so often with the detective story, be left with that vague malaise which accompanies one of Hercule Poirot's conjuring tricks: the act is too crisp, too conclusive; the thing is devoured too swiftly, eliminated too completely. One may think with Julien Sorel: "Ce n'est que ça?" and the very thought betokens some doubt, some dissatisfaction, some feeling that the portentous build-up had promised more, even threatened more: something is missing in the links between the Cause (in Balzac's case upper case) and the Effect.

"Secret," "mystery," "enigma": once one takes note of it, Balzac's writing seems riddled with references to the unknown, the unresolved, the unaccountable. The secret may concern a *question of identity*: in *Le Colonel Chabert* the central character is a "missing person," taken for dead, whose position has been usurped, exploited; a *relationship*: in *Ferragus* the virtuous Madame Jules is connected with a mysterious and violently threatening stranger with whom she appears joined in kinship; a *crime*: in *Un Drame au bord de la mer* the absent drama concerns some unspeakable act of murder; *jouissance:* in *L'Enfant maudit* the writing circles around some Absolute of gratification shared between lovers. In each case what is in question is some missing information or

opaque encounter, essential for sense to be posited, owned, mastered . . . though what is missing, or missed (missing *because* missed?) is often sought with increasing apprehension, as if the desire, the rage to know is fraught with some anguished fear, some dread of knowing, against which the writing, while manifestly working towards some solution, deviously defends itself. Identity, relationship, *jouissance,* crime: these mysteries seem to suggest that their uncovering in narrative may reactivate some memory unable to be borne, and call radically into question unruffled fictions of continuity, totality and resolution.

Exemplary in this respect is a short work enigmatically titled *La Grande Bretèche,* in which the narrative obsessively insists on a "pensée inconnue," a "secret," a "Mystère," setting itself up as an "immense énigme dont le secret n'est connu de personne." The story (which is often published as a complete text in anthologies) is in fact part of a longer work, *Autre Etude de femme,* in which are related a series of narratives concerning violent events apparently connected in each case with a woman's infidelity. The narrators are all men, and the *effects* of the narratives are described predominantly insofar as they affect the women among the listeners. In *La Grande Bretèche* the narrator is Horace Bianchon, a man of passionate curiosity and great learning, whose psychological perspicacity is frequently relied upon to analyze some physical or mental symptom, and to provide for all of us, with Balzac's implied approbation, a quite conclusive interpretation.

In *La Grande Bretèche* he is baffled. In spite of restless curiosity and relentless interrogation he succeeds only in arriving at a confused apprehension of the events which supposedly took place in the abandoned house known as "La Grande Bretèche," to which he comes as a stranger, an outsider. That there took place some unspeakable event is certain; but the event, described as a violently catastrophic separation, can only be reconstructed out of three different narratives and given a tentative (and fearsome) interpretation which Bianchon passes on, with some complacency, to his listeners, the women among whom react with a chill of horror.

The three narrators, each of whom relates a different segment of the story, are a lawyer (Regnault), an innkeeper's wife (Mme Lepas), and a servant girl (Rosalie). All were involved in the gruesome events which involved three other persons: Mme de Merret, her husband and a mysterious stranger, a Spanish prisoner named Bagos de Feredia. Regnault, the man of the law, forbids Bianchon to trespass in the ruins of "La Grande Bretèche," and relates the terrible suffering and death of the countess. Mme Lepas reluctantly tells the beginning of the story—the arrival of the Spanish prisoner who swims in the river opposite the house of the countess, and one day mysteriously disappears. Rosalie, equally reluctant but finally seduced by Bianchon, leads him toward the "center" of the story: M. de Merret, returning one evening unexpectedly, hears a noise in his wife's closet; in spite of her denial (sworn on a crucifix) that anyone is there, the count sends for a mason and orders the closet to be bricked up, and sadistically compells his wife to remain in the room for twenty days until no further sounds are to be heard. Shortly afterward the count dies, and his wife, after ordering "La Grande Bretèche" to remain closed and untouched for fifty years, dies after a long

period of suffering. In her final moments a fierce joy blazes from her eyes, a joy which remains startlingly present, "gravé sur ses yeux morts," even beyond her death.

Curiously, Bianchon is the (initially anonymous) narrator of the whole sequence entitled *Autre Etude de femme*, a first-person narrator who is, notwithstanding, indistinguishable from an omniscient narrator, relaying the various anecdotes and exchanges but also intervening with insights, comments and generalizations, demonstrating the unlimited privilege of the usual Balzacian narrator. Yet immediately before beginning to recount, again in the first person, *his* story (*La Grande Bretèche*), the text makes of him the *object* of a narrative voice which exceeds him: "'Ah! répliqua le docteur, j'ai de terribles histoires dans mon répertoire . . .' A un geste du complaisant docteur, le silence régna." This abrupt shift from omniscience, combined with a gloss on "complaisant" as describing "a person who closes his eyes to amorous intrigue," gives rise to the paradoxical figure of a master analyst (Bianchon expresses his desire not to give up his search before learning "toute l'histoire de la Grande Bretèche"), whose optic is limited, who cannot or does not choose to see, and who also, although apparently dispassionate and objective, is *implicated* (the word "complaisant" suggests as much) in the narrative. Certainly this immediately raises the question of the position of the subject in the text and the relationship between narrator and narrated; such a shift suggests a displacement which implies the narrator's identification with at least parts of the narrated. The text does in fact indicate a strong emotional reaction, as Bianchon recalls the mixture of lively pleasure and involuntary terror which accompanied his relentless search for knowledge. The events become endowed with uncanny signifi- cance if we interpret them as being connected with Bianchon himself.

Certainly, Bianchon's position in the narration is problematical. On the one hand he is the sender, insofar as he is recounting one of the stories from his repertoire to a group of listeners; on the other hand he is the receiver of three narratives which he does no more than repeat, although he admits that there has been some editing, some "abridgement." Throughout are raised problems of position (analyst or analysand?), repetition, resistance, and transference, and above all, the question of the relationship between Bianchon's relentless curiosity, his passionate desire to know and the constructions he confers upon the events. It becomes increasingly evident that his interpretation comes up sharp against the mysterious resistance of the story being pursued, a resistance as redoubtable as the fortress-like house whose presence commands the tale.

The first few pages describe Bianchon's passionate yet circumspect endeavor to penetrate the secret of the mysterious abode, *La Grande Bretèche*, whose devastated garden and crumbling ruins— described with Poe-like apprehension—attract and repel him. The narration recoils from its own titleobject in horror ("terreurs involontaires," "j'ai frissonné"), estranged as from some "cloister," "cemetery," "leper colony," "house of Atreus"; yet at the same time it is drawn towards it with a certain lustful pleasure ("poésies inédites dont je m'enivrais," "débauches de l'imagination"), which uncannily suggests a satisfaction once familiar. In Kleinian, rather than in Freudian terms, the ambivalence signaled by the uncanny sends back to a scenario of fearsome anxiety and violence. For Melanie Klein, the mother's body is the locus of the child's initial

experiencing and exploration of the world. In Lacan's words: "Through Melanie Klein we know the function of the imaginary primordial enclosure formed by the imago of the mother's body; through her we have the cartography, draw by the child's own hands, of the mother's internal empire, the historical atlas of the intestinal divisions in which the *imagos* of the father and brothers (real or virtual), in which the voracious aggression of the subject himself, dispute their deleterious dominance over her sacred regions." Central to Melanie Klein's view of the development of the psyche is the primacy of the mother's body as the origin of the child's quest for knowledge—a lustful drive which takes the inner space of the mother's body as the source of sexual gratification, and which also, sadistically, aims to invade, plunder and destroy that same body which contains hated and feared signs of hostility or loss, in particular the phalluses of the father or of the brother, detested rivals in the search for absolute possession. The child's imagined attacks lead to phantasies of a poisoned body mutilated and destroyed by acts of sadistic aggression; and this fragmented body becomes, through projective identification, an image of the child's own body and of his ego. Dramatically countering this image of the body "in bits and pieces" is the phantasy of the perfect body, the body once again whole□which the child constructs from the idealized portrait of the mother or from his own image, jubilantly discovered and re-discovered in the mirror reflecting his phantasy of Oneness.

The house in *La Grande Bretèche* is likened to "the house of Atreus," recalling a history of bestiality (Zeus and Europa), adultery (Clytemnestra and Egisthus), incestuous love (Phaedra and Hippolytus), enemy brothers (Atreus and Thyestes), inter-familial murder (Egisthus and Agamemnon), and matricide (Orestes and Clytemnestra). Pre-dominant throughout the myth is the drama of a *family* and the violence and sexual rivalries within blood relationships. Curiously, in the MS of *La Grande Bretèche* (and again in the Introduction to the *Etudes de moeurs* published in 1835) Madame de Merret's name is spelled MÉRÉ, and Feredia appears as Heredia—the name of a lover of Balzac's mother. Heredia is often supposed to be the father of Balzac's brother Henry—Henry "le bien aimé" towards whom Balzac had unremitting feelings of hostility and jealousy. The third person, the intruder, the rival the mother's lover (man or child), sign of dispossession, object of hatred and aggression— this is the figure whose brutal death forms the climax of *La Grande Bretèche.*

Bianchon's uncanny narrative can be read as the obsessive return to the scene of a crime in which he himself is implicated and which his narrative attempts to analyze and, in recounting, in iterating, to master. His journey backwards in time takes him towards the mother and her body as origin and source of pleasure and discontent. One of the narrators, Regnault, the man of the Law, taunts him with an incestuous lure: "'Etes-vous allé à Merret (MÉRÉ), Monsieur?' 'Non,' dit-il, en faisant luimême sa réponse." And again: "'Ah! mais vous n'êtes pas allé à Merret!'." The fearful movement of the text seems anxiously to be repeating a scenario once experienced—a scenario involving both pleasure and crime (pleasure *as* crime, crime *as* pleasure, perhaps)—seeking to unravel the knot and to supply or supplement some missing information: "'J'essayai de pénétrer dans cette mystérieuse demeure [la Grande Bretèche] en y cherchant le noeud de cette solennelle histoire . . .'." The search takes Bianchon to the servant Rosalie who is mysteriously implicated in the drama, indeed apparently at its *center* wherein lies the

truth: "Elle était au centre même de l'intérêt et de la vérité." Throughout, the narrative has been suggesting that the place of the secret, the place where sense is secreted, is the *center* (both of the other narrators are also positioned at the center: Regnault is associated with "milieu précis," Mme Lepas with "juste milieu"). Discovery of the center would bring the narrative to a halt at a final point, arresting the play of language at a fixed position, a place of ultimate knowing at which the writing would come to rest.

But the position of the center as locus of truth is called into question: Rosalie's crucial position is compared to that of the central square on a chessboard ("la case qui se trouve au milieu d'un damier"), a space which of course doesn't exist. The displaced center is replaced by the figure of the *knot* in which Rosalie, apparently a mere spectator, is herself implicated ("elle me semblait nouée dans le noeud"). The knot is what analysis is called upon to wrestle with; and, in Lacan's reading of Freud, the knot implies the prior existence of a "bad" encounter, an encounter "forever missed"—an encounter which, if unsymbolized, keeps on repeating itself as an absent, yet unwelcome cause which produces anxious, painful and inexplicable effects. Bianchon's own narrative is clearly a repetition in a different, hence novel form of the original scenario involving the murder of Feredia. But the crucial sexual encounter between Bianchon and Rosalie "takes place" in an ellipsis ("un soir, ou plutôt un matin"), an ellipsis which indicates a repetition of the encounter as missed; and the coital act in which the truth is quested leads only to a magical "theft" resulting in what Bianchon himself calls "une confuse connaissance" and in the reinterment of the secret.

Of transference Lacan writes: "If the transference is only repetition, it will only be of the same missed encounter." And the same may be said of *reading*. In seducing Rosalie Bianchon acts indeed like the impatient reader who wills to penetrate the text's secret by forcing a repetition rather than by essaying a reconstruction. And in seeking the truth from the one who apparently knows ("il y avait dans cette fille le dernier chapitre d'un roman"), he behaves like the analysand who demands knowledge through "seduction" of the other while ignoring the implication of the other in the act of exchange. The test insists that Rosalie's involvement in the psychic drama goes well beyond her roles of servant and spectator: she bears on her features "les traces d'une pensée intime" bespeaking the existence of some "secret" which is astonishingly linked to that of "la fille *infanticide* qui entend toujours le dernier cri de son enfant" (my italics). The text has already set up the murdered Feredia as *infans*, the one who does not speak ("si on lui parlait, il ne répondait pas"); and a reading of his swimming across to Merret, naked, "nageant comme un poisson," via the equation fish-phallus-child/water- womb, set alongside the double evocation *infans, infanticide*, suggests that the unconscious drama to be reconstructed has to do with a psychic reality whose scenario implicates the dual relationship binding child and mother, a relationship which here is associated with some mysterious crime.

The "reality" which is quested (and occulted) by a cryptic text like *La Grande Bretèche* must be presumed, in a psychoanalytical reading, to lie in the conflict of incompatibilities waged between unconscious desire—whose "realization" represents the text's impossible utopia—and the counterforce of some (equally unconscious) obstacle, contrary wish or interdiction. Nicolas Abraham has suggested a more precise and potent

definition of psychic reality which can prove productive in reconstructing such enigmatic texts as *La Grande Bretèche*. For Abraham, Reality (the capital R signi- fies its "anasemic" nature) is that which comes into existence through the insistence that it remain . . . denied, hidden, inadmissable, unnamable. Just as desire is intricated with the interdiction which founds it, so Reality comes into play associated with what makes its realization unthinkable and its articulation impossible. The unthinkableness of Reality derives from its incompatible, heterogeneous, warring components—" jouissance" and crime, "jouissance" associated in the psyche with crime, "jouissance" in its very affirmation experienced as crime. In their re-reading of the Wolfman case, Abraham and Torok posit a duplicity of sense in which the Wolfman affirms "jouissance" through his relationship with his father-as-ideal while denying in paralyzing fashion its very possibility because of the father's betrayal and degradation through his incestuous relationship with his daughter. The Wolfman's secret locks together in a puzzle of tessera the absolute contradictions attendant on his desire—tessera whose fragmentation betokens the radical impossibility of any processes of introjection, sublimation, symbolization: the very ground, the "given" of symbol-formation is fractured by the subjacent con- flict and by its association with a crime which precludes identification and shatters the coherence of the ego. Yet the secret must be preserved—retained and hidden in enigmatic form—if the "idyllic" outcome quested by desire is to continue to exist within the bounds of possibility. Foreclosure would condemn the subject to oblivion; preservation is achieved through a magical act which encrypts the conflict within the ego in a fetishistic and non-sensical key-word, itself blocking the motion of desire and halting any symbolic process—yet indirectly, enigmatically productive of sense. *Le Verbier de l'Homme aux loups* is the analysis of the taboo words, the "cryptonyms," the fetish-words, and the "allosemes," whose peculiar figurations and interactions disguise (and finally betray) the Wolfman's Reality.

The problem being posed by *La Grande Bretèche* (and by such other Balzacian texts as *Un Drame au bord de la mer, L'Enfant maudit* and *La Fille aux yeux d'or* in which the conjuncture of *jouissance* and crime is central) is how does writing contain embodied within it an unbearable Reality which it cannot *be* or *do* without? And how does it attempt to fortify itself (to what extent and with what counterforces of resistance, distortion, phantasy and duplicity—and with what success?) against Reality's *effects* as they traverse the text with their ineluctable reminders of separation, defect, lack, and loss, derivative representations of some primordial crime? One might suppose, simply, that a text "takes in" what it can deal with and leaves outside what is hostile or alien to its functioning, conducting itself in this like the primitive ego, either "introjecting" or "ejecting." In Kleinian terms, objects are introjected as signs affecting both ego-structure and object-relations; the process of introjection may be doubled by phantasy acts of appropriation whereby intolerable objects are magically relegated to the deepest layers of the unconscious. Working from this distinction, Abraham and Torok have developed the notion of "incorporation" to describe a phantasmatic act of magical ingestion and violent entombment which merely *mines* the expansive process of normal introjection. Incorporation usurps a place (in the psyche, in writing) where an object, event or person may be *retained,* because needed (as reminiscence of *jouissance*), while at the same time it is *excluded* from the scrutiny of consciousness, "encrypted" within the ego.

For Freud, the ego is an organization characterized by compulsion to synthesize, binding energy in the form of representation; ego, like a well-made plot in narrative, is formed out of what has been taken in, introjected. *Introjection* is defined in opposition to rejection and expulsion. In Freud's words: "Expressed in the language of the oldest—the oral— instinctual impulses, [the subject says]: 'I should like to eat this,' or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.'" This definition of the oral stage implies either/or: either "inside" or "outside," "good" or "bad," with the two first terms allied against the two second terms. Introjection, first defined by Ferenczi in 1909, is "an extension to the external world of the subject's original autoerotic interests, by including its objects in the ego." Ferenczi stresses the expansive and unifying force of introjection: *Einbeziehung,* pulling in, integrating. "I put the emphasis on this 'including' and wanted to show thereby that I considered every sort of object love or transference as an extension of ego . . . that is of introjection." Introjection attempts to overcome separation and loss by integration and symbolization; ideally, the dynamic, expansive process of introjection would dispense with phantasy, constituting the ego by means of repetition, transference (*Ubertragung*: retranscription), and symbolization.

But what of the object or event which cannot be introjected or rejected, for example a lost or missed object whose "presence" is simultaneously desired or prohibited, needed and feared, associated with a *jouissance* once experienced or hallucinated, but marked and marred by the stigma of crime—an object which the subject cannot do or be without, yet which must remain *without,* and yet not abolished? Ego's offensive-defensive strategy here is the phantasmatic act of incorporation, a silent, omnipotent act of magical, secretive and protective appropriation which simulates or mimes the forward process of introjection, to which it is related . . . nostalgically. Because of the object's association with Reality (as that secret force which demands an intolerable modification of the ego and poses a threat to narcissistic integrity and omnipotence), the object must be delivered of its existence and violently occulted, and yet in some cryptic form must be accessible (but only to the subject), because the *jouissance* associated with it has become essential. Ego's response to this dilemma is to encrypt the object, to bury it alive, as object and yet as language, as monstrous object-language which defies symbolization (and hence communication and exchange), and which is nonetheless "readable" by the subject as a message signifying the contradictions associated with it (*jouissance* and crime). This enactment is named by Nicolas Abraham as "conservative repression," implying exclusion *and* retention, the words encoding the object being lodged inside the split ego, buried, "encrypted," yet accessible.

This conservative repression has a paralyzing and stunting effect on the subject, since the crime associated with *jouissance* has caused the forbidden word to be withdrawn from circulation, isolated and sealed with the virulent hatred associated with the crime which cannot be mourned. The result is that the analyst (or the reader) is faced with that duplicity of discourse which Freud associates with fetishism and splitting of the ego, except that here the language of denial, although indisputably fetishistic in its phantasmatic protectiveness, is even more enigmatic than usual, since it contains echoes of an imaginary scenario composed of contradictory and utterly irreconcilable elements.

In *La Grande Bretèche jouissance* is represented by the longed-for fusion (or "dual unity," to use Nicolas Abraham's term) between Feredia and Mme de Merret, in which each seeks complementarity in the other. This utopian phantasy is articulated in the repeated phrase, involving Bianchon as well as Feredia, "aller à Merret." For Nicolas Abraham such utopian phantasies are represented in the *id*, where the mother and the child's desire for herare kept alive; this universal unconscious phantasy causes the mother to project onto her child *her* wish to rediscover the lost dual unity with her own mother. Longing for fusion is the insistent, magical, omnipotent demand which traverses the *Comédie humaine* and which finds expression in the desire to be re-united with the Other in a state of absolute Oneness. Thus Louis Lambert writing to Pauline: "Je voudrais me glisser dans tous les actes de ta vie, être la substance même de tes pensées, *je voudrais être toi-même*. . . . Aucun sentiment humain ne troublera plus notre amour, infini dans ses transformations et *pur comme tout ce qui est un*; notre amour vaste comme la mer, vaste comme le ciel! Tu es à moi! toute à moi!"

In the Balzacian text, the source of absolute *jouissance* is located in the Other, and, in the apprehension of the child, initially in the ideal figure of the mother ("La Femme dans la perfection de ses attributs," as Louis Lambert's mother is represented). Attainment of desire is rendered by phantasmatic invasion and possession of the Other ("En effet, le désir ne constitue-t-il une sorte de possession intuitive," in Balzac's words). Nonattainment is experienced by the Balzacian character as catastrophic separation, a sudden fall into anxiety caused by a longed-for encounter missed, a gratification denied. Denial of absolute gratification leads to vulnerability and a return of infantile helplessness (thus Louis Lambert, isolated in his madness, comes to resemble "a child in his cradle"). In Freudian terms, non-satisfaction, caused by the loss of a once known or, rather, hallucinated gratification, leads to anxiety because of unanticipated "growing tension due to need, against which (the infant) is helpless." This tension is felt *by the ego* as a threat to its constant "striving for binding and unification." For Melanie Klein such a condition is best described as "a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits," as if the ego is undergoing violent persecution from the Other.

The drive towards fetishistic idealization and perfectionism of the Balzacian text is frequently interrupted or succeeded by scenarios of sadistic violence including mutilation and murder. In *Un Drame au bord de la mer*, the monstrous child Jacques assaults and stabs his mother, Jacquette, whose refusal to gratify his voracious desires thwarts and frustrates him. In *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, de Marsay's inability to achieve total gratification with Paquita Valdès leads to a brutal act of murder: Paquita's body is ripped and slashed in a scene of incredible violence. In *La Grande Bretèche*, the violence of the unrepresented encounter between Feredia and Madame de Merret is suggested by the play of names (Fer/Mer; Brette/ Bretèche) and by the scars and gashes on the body of the mutilated building ("désordre," "dévorée," "disloquée," "démolie," "rongé," "trous nombreux," "lézardes [qui] sillonnent les murs"), reiterated in the description of the body of Madame de Merret ("décharnée," "rongé," "abattu," "violet pâle." Bianchon's language, couched in the rhetoric of curiosity and quest for truth, suggests that conjunction of the scoptophilic and epistemophilic drives which, for Freud, are derivatives of the sexual instinct ("thirst for knowledge [being] inseparable from sexual curiosity," and connected, as attempted mastery, with sadism). Melanie Klein

insists on the presence of the mother's body as focus of this drive: "The first object of the instinct for knowledge is the interior of the mother's body. . . . [The child] wants to force its way into the mother's body in order to take possession of its contents and destroy them. . . . Thus the instinct for knowledge becomes linked at its source with sadism when it is at its height, which [explains] why the instinct for knowledge should arouse so much guilt in the individual."

In *La Grande Bretèche* the secret, encrypted Reality of the text consists of the absolute contradiction between what must be preserved at all costs (that hallucinated *jouissance* uniting the *infans* Feredia and Mme de Merret) and what cannot in any way be acknowledged (phantasies of mutilation of the mother's body and the retaliatory act of infanticide). The emmurement and death of the child can be read as unconscious projections of punishment merited by infantile acts of aggression—a scheme akin to those incredible scenarios outlined by Melanie Klein in her discussion of the child's phantasies of attacking and sadistically entering the mother's body: "Unconscious phantasies of forcing the whole self into the inside of the object [to obtain control and possession] lead, through the fear of retaliation to a variety of persecutory anxieties such as claustrophobia. These fears are connected with the unconscious 'catastrophic' phantasies of being dismembered . . . and torn to pieces, and of total internal disruption of the body and personality and loss of identity—fears which are an elaboration of the fear of annihilation." The "catastrophic separation" of which Bianchon speaks, and the mutilated appearance of the bodies of "La Grande Bretèche" and Mme de Merret, together with the incarceration and death of the child, are the disruptive, fragmenting elements of the text which threaten its coherence and hegemony. The writing as narration strives to present continuity, concatenation and control, and to represent a series of scenarios which place the subject (Bianchon) in the fictitious position of spectator, merely curious observer, Master. Denying the subject's implication, attempting to overcome con- flict and contradiction, the narratives aim to provide a movement towards homogenization and totalization and to present a formal, abstract, closed perfection, sealing off, and bricking up the violent, forceful, random, heterogeneous drives which inhabit the figure of the *infans* Feredia, Bianchon's double, the other stranger. The narration, here as elsewhere in Balzac (in *Le Colonel Chabert, Ferragus, La Recherche de l'absolu*, for example) submits its own ambivalent Reality to a rigorous and imperious restructuring, feigning omniscience, establishing authority, and magically, omnipotently attempting to deny and conceal what threatens its mastery. It is here that we see the totalitarian aspect of Balzac's writing which comes into being out of desire, randomness and violence and which responds by repression, murder and violent emmurement.

Yet its own enactment is its own undoing. Not, one should say, as a result of any narrative process of introjection which might lead to transference: Bianchon's rape of the secret only leads to its reincarceration, and he does no more than pass on to his listeners, sadistically, the message he cannot bear. The text's undoing is through the very language which would contain its fracture. As in the dream where fragmentation is contained in the rebus only to be again fragmented; as from the crypt where the secret, buried in code, re-surfaces in indirect forms of language, so in *La Grande Bretèche* does the compressed enigma force its way through— *as writing*, in the letters of the

writing itself, in the name of the stranger which the text would deny. Denial takes the form of emphatic negation: Mme Lepas asserts that there is nothing to tell, that she knows "nothing"; Mme de Merret swears that there is "nobody" in the closet, the narrative closes on the echo of this *nobody*: "'Vous avez juré sur la croix qu'il n'y avait *personne* '." This "nobody" is the outsider, the mysterious third party, the one who does not speak, whose name is at first given as no more than an approximation: Mme Lepas recalls only that the name contains "os" and "dia," that it is something like "Bagos de Feredia." It is a name that can be read, if one wishes to do so; Mme Lepas has it written down in her register. Interpretation is clearly a matter of *reading*, and Bianchon resists; "Mastery" is achieved at the expense of reading, indeed here Mastery is in *not* reading, refusing involvement: Bianchon evidences his resistance in his response to Mme Lepas: "Si votre confi- dence est de nature à me compromettre, pour tout au monde je ne voudrais pas en être chargé." The burden of Bianchon's Reality is one he will not assume.

The stranger is marked as an indeterminate figure ("figure indécise"), and the writing draws attention to the possibility of interpretive duplicity by reference to "paroles à double entente." Bagos de Feredia, though real enough, seems to resist symbolization absolutely; *said*, his name says nothing, just as he himself says nothing. The foreign, alien letters are there—but excluded from interpretation, incorporated into the writing, sealed in the text, but making no sense, dumbfounding the reader. In "Bagos de Feredia" sense, as a whole, is mocked; we are left merely with the figure of a "stranger," an "unknown" quantity. The name itself is the unknown, the unknowable: the text is right to have the last word as "nobody." The name itself draws attention to the difficulty of making sense out of the random and the disparate: *Bagos* derives from the Spanish *vago,* synonymous with *indefinido, vacio* (indistinct, void—of sense); to be deciphered, as is, *en vago:* in vain (*en vago:* "without succeeding in arriving at the goal of one's desires"; "being deceived in one's judgment"). The name, like the figure, makes knowledge and judgement difficult, yet excites deciphering. And the name itself, fragmented already by Mme Lepas into *os* and *dia*, does suggest circulation, vagabonding; another sense of *vago* is "shifting from place to place to place without stopping at any point." The signifier, fragmenting, fragmented, forces its way through the writing as the cryptic "proper" name disintegrates into its diacritical marks, unstable and duplicitous: FereDIA: DIA (according to the O.E.D.) twice, a-two, through, thorough, thoroughly apart. The name itself as signifier suggests absence of unity and a process of doubling echoed by BI-anchon, the other stranger. And the conjunction of OS and DIA (day) suggests death intricated with life, unpresentable yet percussively active in the writing in the substitutes and supplements of its mark (for example Feredia's cross which, in the possession of Mme de Merret, becomes the sign of their conjunction, separation and death—fissuring sign, mocking fusion). Death in life, not here, as in *La Peau de chagrin*, a longedfor state of suspension of motion, but an active, potent force. But also *life in death*, the desire for *jouissance* continuing into death (Feredia's *regard de feu* echoing the joy engraved upon the dead eyes of Mme de Merret). The narration attempts to separate life and death by fortifying itself against its own secret and by incarcerating the random figure of the stranger; but the writing, repeatedly, divisively inscribes their conjunction.

Here, in *La Grande Bretèche*, as so often in the *Comédie humaine* and in nineteenth-century fiction, narration and phantasy collaborate in a forcible attempt to banish contradiction, conflict, randomness and heterogeneity (represented by the unstable, wanton, violent figure of the child), and present the final version of events (in this case Rosalie's narrative) as a solution to the enigma and as a resolution. The solution here is in fact presented by Bianchon in his own words—as an abridgment: he admits that he has condensed, abbreviated Rosalie's diffuse eloquence ("j'abrège donc" [p. 108]), "Abréger" suggests not only condensation but also omission . . . of letters, as in abbreviation. And indeed in the final part of the narration there is no mention of the name Bagos de Feredia; there is a reference only to "l'étranger," to "l'inconnu": the proper name is erased from the writing—a strategy which recalls the manner in which, according to Freud, we attempt to eradicate the intolerable from out histories: "Almost everywhere noticeable gaps, disturbing repetitions and obvious contradictions have come about—indications which reveal things to us which it was not intended to communicate. In its implications the distortions of a text resemble a murder: the difficulty is not in perpetrating the deed, but in getting rid of its traces. . . . Accordingly, in many instances of textual distortion, we may nevertheless count upon finding what has been suppressed and disavowed hidden away somewhere else, though changed and torn from its context. Only it will not always be easy to recognize it." In *La Grande Bretèche* I would argue that the "detective" Bianchon is also the murderer—murderer of those parts of himself which he cannot abide. In tracking down the crime he attempts to abolish his own traces, by banishing, eliminating, emmuring the double of himself, the child he will not assume. In approaching Rosalie he claims to be questing "le noeud de cette solennelle *histoire"* (my italics), but he finds there the merest fiction ("il y avait dans cette fille le dernier chapitre d'un *roman"* [my italics]), which turns out to be a phantasy of his own making. The distinction between "histoire" and "roman" in this context can be connected with that between the terms Reality and phantasy as we have been using them throughout. Here "roman" seductively attempts to phantasize away "histoire"; as so often in Balzac, the romancing text masks and spirits away the unbearable knot of its conflictual origin.

But for the reader, the knot is in language, is language, in the signs which compose and decompose the name Bagos de Feredia—signs of that "nobody" whose unstable name inscribes the random, duplicitous, heterogeneous, violent play of the *infans* who finally becomes seen as the pressuring force of the text—desire, *jouissance*, violence, death—a monstrous sign, sign of the monstrous, breaching the repressive fortification of the narration. In this writing, the secret is not an absent center, or an absence at the center, or (as Todorov would have it) an impenetrable essence, but always already an imprint of that Reality which though incorporated, vomited into the crypt, maintains the continuous pressure of an occult force, an inexplicable and monstrous Thing which, buried alive in code, is nonetheless active and actively signifying: an enigma whose decipherment is up to the reader— if the reader is up to it. If the reader refuses to be tyrannized into silence and accepts the transferential activity of reading as the de-crypting of the writing and as the perilous re-enactment of the text's unconscious. As the text itself puts it: "Vous pouvez le lire si vous voulez."

Source: Peter Lock, "Text Crypt" in *MLN,* Vol. 97, No. 4, May 1982, pp. 872-89.

Topics for Further Study

What is the significance of Monsieur Regnault's diamond pin? Why does he mention it to Dr. Bianchon?

What other stories have you read that remind you of the opening of *La Grande Bretèche* with its description of the ruined house and garden? Why do you think the place has such an effect on Bianchon?

What is your judgement of Madame de Merret's choice to let her lover die in the closet rather than go back on her oath to her husband? What other options did she have? Who is ultimately responsible for Feredia de Bagos's death?

Why do you think the ladies shivered at the end to Bianchon's tale?

Further Study

Bertault, Philippe, *Balzac and the The Human Comedy,* New York: New York University Press, 1963.

An approachable but somewhat dated overview of Balzac's major work. Contains a useful biographical sketch as well as a chronology of the major works that comprise The Human Comedy

Festa-McCormick, Diana, *Honore De Balzac,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979.

As usual, the Twayne series provides a comprehensive introduction to the author's life and career. The chapters are organized chronologically and focus on individual works.

Lukacher, Maryline, *Maternal Fictions: Stendahl, Sand, Rachilde, and Bataille,* Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

Though Balzac is not one of the principle authors that she focuses on, her introduction contains an interesting discussion of how Balzac's relationship with his mother is reflected in his writing.

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McCarthy, Mary Susan, *Balzac and his Reader,* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982, pp.1-145.

Raitt, A.W., ed., *Balzac: Short Stories,* London: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 10, 16.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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