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# Money and tragedy in the nineteenth-century novel

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MONEY AND TRAGEDY  
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Interdepartmental Program in Comparative Literature

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## ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century novelists studied in this dissertation used tragic form to investigate economic and social changes taking place around them. Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1834), William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884-1885), Giovanni Verga's *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1888), Benito Pérez Galdós's *Miau*, (1888), and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) reflect the interest of writers in France, the United States, Italy, Spain, and Germany in questions concerning how money in an evolving capitalist society not only had a major role in shaping the behavior and personalities of specific individuals but also affected such institutions as the family. Under these changing social conditions, these writers developed a new tragic model: a middle-class individual destroyed by social and economic change involving the role of money in a capitalist society. In their novels, the businessman or bureaucrat replaced the nobility as a subject for a tragedy, which could consist of an entire novel or a tragic narrative imbedded in a novel.

One aspect of the role of money which these novelists chose to investigate was how bankruptcy, either the catastrophe itself or the fear of it, could lead to tragedy. Caught up in the struggle to prosper, the individual man, and in the novels studied here it is always a man, became alienated within his

family and society as relations based on the need to make money replaced traditional bonds based on family and social ties. The lives of the main protagonists revealed similar characteristics related to how money affected their function in society and gave the novelists the tools they needed for an investigation of the new capitalism.

These novels parallel work being done by the writers' contemporaries who were analyzing the same social phenomena and developing ideas which would become modern social science. The tragic figure in these novels could easily be seen as being caught in Max Weber's 'iron cage', the result of allowing capitalism's ethic of money-making to become too important in his life. Georg Simmel's writing on the function of money, tragedy, exchange theory, and gratitude are also important in understanding these novels.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

"Bankruptcy is perhaps the greatest and most humiliating calamity which can befall an innocent man.

The greater part of men, therefore, are sufficiently careful to avoid it. Some, indeed, do not avoid it; as some do not avoid the gallows."

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

"Money we know will do almost everything, and no doubt money had had much to do with this."

Anthony Trollope, *He Knew He Was Right*

"La vie n'est-elle pas une machine à laquelle l'argent imprime le mouvement?"

Honoré de Balzac, *Gobseck*

"It seems there is a kind of satisfaction in the work of picking up gold besides the mere gain."

Daniel Defoe, *A New Voyage Around the World by a Course Never Sailed Before*<sup>1</sup>

## I

### Tragedy and Money: A Statement of Purpose

The nineteenth-century novelists studied here gave tragic form to their works to show how the struggle to acquire money shaped the personalities and behavior of those living in the evolving capitalist society which they saw around them. Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (1834), William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884-1885), Giovanni Verga's *Mastro-don Gesualdo* (1888), Benito Pérez Galdós's *Miau* (1888), and Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) all have major figures for whom the fierce struggle to make money leads only to spiritual or

financial bankruptcy and misery. Money as a medium of social exchange distorts traditional social and family ties and leads not only to the central figures being alienated from those around them in the greater world of business and society but also from members of their own family. This alienation from others hastens the deterioration of their personality and the lonely death that follows is the logical end to each man's tragedy.

It is important to note that these novels have been presented at times as 'tragedies' by critics. However, to date no one has pointed out how the form of tragedy seen in these works as a group relates to a specific Euro-American phenomenon: a novel with a middle-class character whose tragic fate is directly related to the function of money in society. The tragedy in these novels reveals individual suffering within a larger and dominant social reality. Although the individual tragedy is real, the writers' objective approach gives the reader little hope that the suffering will lead to communal healing or a new and better social order.

This study is purposely descriptive and like Aristotle's *Poetics* the "method is empirical" (Ferguson 3). In that method lies its thesis, i.e., to show by clear example how a distinct form of tragedy in a select group of nineteenth-century novels can be described in terms taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Each

novel has a central figure who occupies a position of at least some prominence in his society and all have plots based on reversal, recognition, and pathos. The remarks in the *Poetics* defining each of the classic terms apply clearly to what is seen in these novels.

First, Aristotle says for the tragedy to be most effective the work should represent the fall of a

man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. (*Poetics* 76)

I think it is clear that with the evolution of culture from Aristotle's time to nineteenth-century capitalism, the middle-class figures of these novels fulfill this requirement. A common theme in many novels, including those in this study, is that the members of the commercial and financial sectors of society were coming to form a new and respected class of people whose position and values were tied to the new economic forces that were changing society.

Although George Steiner expressed a belief common to many critics that "There is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy" (241), I believe the history of the form during the Industrial Revolution refutes his idea. A deeper understanding of history and humanity gave new status to ordinary people and

allowed them to take their place in literature, and in tragedy. I will discuss this at greater length later in this introduction.

The other defining terms of a tragedy found in Aristotle are also clearly applicable to these novels: "Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite" (72); "Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge" (72); and "The Scene of Suffering [translated as 'pathos', by others] is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like" (73). Further, in each case, we see the central figure fail due to some some 'error or frailty', giving us clear examples of Aristotle's term *hamartia*. In each novel studied here, when the main protagonists begin to see the truth, when there is recognition of how they have failed, the tragedy is inescapable and it is very clear here that for these writers the "action of perceiving, passing from ignorance to knowledge is near the heart of tragedy" (Ferguson 18). Any description of the novels mentioned above must take all these terms into consideration and I will do so in the analysis of each work.

In discussions such as what I am doing in this study, it is common to point out a distinction between the words 'tragedy' and the 'tragic'. 'Tragedy' in such a discussion

usually refers to the literary form of a work, normally a drama but here a novel, which presents an interpretation of the meaning of human life or suffering and arouses a particular emotional response. 'Tragic' refers to a particular way of looking at the world. Here, I present these novels as having the formal structure of tragedy but more important is the clear assumption by each author that what is being presented is significant to the life of the reader and something that must be faced. Their aim is to show how what is happening in the evolving culture affects those who live in that culture, and it is clear that for these novels, like classic tragedy, the insight which they give into the nature of human life "satisfies our need to know and understand" (Ferguson 5).

This study obviously rests on a formalist premise that the novelists I am looking at used tragedy, a specific cultural and literary form, as a tool to present what they saw around them. I am also assuming that tragic form in literature is a culture trait that can be spread by diffusion throughout the literary world to the point that it becomes a common and shared way of interpreting certain aspects of our existence. The point is not that these writers were influenced by one another or by some seminal work they had all read, but rather that tragedy in literature, based on a long tradition, was an

accepted convention in Euro-American culture. These novelists chose tragic form independently as an interpretive device to make sense of how their own countries were being affected by this "new type of economic civilization" (Tawney 6). This form, in turn, has become a part of the way I see the world and gives shape to how I interpret these novels.

However, even though this study is descriptive, as John M. Ellis has pointed out, "to talk descriptively of highly valued literary texts is to talk of their value" (*Theory* 102), and the clearly implied judgment here is that these are profound works of literature written in a form intended to point out the grave human consequences of certain economic and social realities. The critical attitude toward nineteenth-century society we see in these works was widespread and the tragedies they present are only a part of a broad effort by many writers in various disciplines and literary genres to understand the evolving capitalist society of the nineteenth century. In many ways, these tragedies are similar to the work done by reformers and social critics of the time concerning the evils of capitalist society and the need for reform. However, these novelists brought a more restrained analysis to their works which is not found in the writings of such caustic social critics as Karl Marx or Thomas Carlyle, for example. In this attempt to take a more objective view of their societies,

their work is more like that being done by the sociologists of the era than the reformers.

By presenting these novels as tragedies, these writers offered an interpretation of experience. Their novels were meant to isolate and give shape to certain aspects of the social reality they and their readers would have seen around them and to help to make sense of the world by giving value to the experience of shared suffering. By showing the tragic results of making the pursuit of money more important than relationships with other people, these five novelists hoped, like all writers of tragedy, to bring the reader to a greater understanding and knowledge of the world.

Since, as Adam Smith pointed out, under a ruthless capitalism in which money defines identity, "bankruptcy is perhaps the greatest and most humiliating calamity which can befall an innocent man" (342), it can be assumed that the individual tragedies presented in the novels would have been of great interest to nineteenth-century readers exactly as the tragedies of Aristotle's time were of interest to those who saw them. These writers have gone further than Smith and noted that the pursuit of money itself could also lead to tragic consequences. Each writer presents a coherent moral universe in which the tragic conflict has to do with the potentially

corrosive power of money in capitalist society to impact human relations.

The concept of tragedy used in the works I look at is related to similar ideas formulated by Max Weber who wrote that the drive to succeed in capitalist society had become an 'iron cage' (*Ethic* 181) which locked the individual into a specific place in the economic system. Those who sought to become richer accepted that the very process of making money had moral value, but over time they found there was no escape from a life they had based on the pursuit of money. In the works studied here, the tragic form provides a conceptual framework to interpret human experience in much the same way. These novelists not only saw how their literary protagonists were trapped in what Max Weber called the 'iron cage' of a life built on the drive to become rich, but also that death was often the only escape for them.

The authors' use of these tragic figures can also be compared to another of Weber's concepts, the 'ideal type', a methodological construct which includes a grouping of traits which define an entity the researcher wants to analyze. Weber used this concept for studies of such phenomena as a 'city economy' versus a 'state economy,' but it worked well for these novelists with individual characters who exhibited bundles of important characteristics related to their function

in the economy and family. I will discuss this at greater length later in this introduction.

I hope that this study is seen as closely following ideas discussed in Raymond Williams's *Modern Tragedy* and Walter Kaufmann's *Tragedy and Philosophy*. What I am writing is inspired by their work, but I do believe I am adding something important in that I do not think either paid sufficient attention to how the form and meaning of tragedy relate to the economic changes represented in many nineteenth-century novels.

Williams has inspired me because of his insistence on the importance of ordinary experience in tragedy and that "tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and resolution" (*Tragedy* 83). Here, I am looking at the specific tragedy related to the massive economic changes of the nineteenth century, and in Williams' terms, the only resolution possible would seem to be for society to come to grips with the fact that a capitalist economy has certain inherent forces that alienate those living in that system from their family and neighbors and leads to a breakdown of community feeling. Williams clearly argues that only when the forces of disorder have been clearly delineated can change become possible. The tragic figures in these novels fail

because they cannot resolve the contradictions and 'disorder' in their own lives.

Kaufmann is a passionate advocate for the idea that tragedy must address the philosophical and moral reality "that suffering is universal—not a mere accident in our experience" (85). His emphasis is on the close analysis of what is really being said in every tragedy in terms of moral philosophy. "The history of philosophy is also the history of analysis and criticism, a progressive disillusionment, a slow stripping away of errors and confusions. And this heritage is not dead" (361). For him, philosophy and tragedy not only enrich each other but also help us to understand the nature of man and of suffering. The moral questioning that lies behind the tragedies studied here is a part of this heritage.

## II

### The Novel and the Study of Culture

It is important to note that the approach taken here purposely builds on work by many scholars showing how the novel evolved over time and, specifically, how the form developed away from the idealized or romantic and toward a more concrete and realistic presentation of life. As writers became more aware of the complexity of their own cultures, the novel of the Industrial Revolution began to tell about the lives and struggles of ordinary people. One of the factors in

this change was that the awareness of history as a force in human life led novelists to see that all lives can have literary significance because everyone is living through the same cultural changes, the same history.

Of course, there had always been works which included people from the lower orders of society, the Picaresque genre, for example, but by the nineteenth century, this democratization of literature had become common and we see numerous serious novels whose main characters are members of the working class or even at times, the very lowest levels of society. The novelists studied here included characters from all levels of society and their works were intended to show life in a time of historical change, continuing an evolution of the novel begun many years before. Georg Lukács noted the relationship between history and the nineteenth-century novel and when discussing Scott, whom he credits with being the first serious writer of historical novels, wrote that

He always starts by showing how important historical changes affect everyday life, the effect of material and psychological changes upon people who react immediately and violently to them, without understanding their causes. Only by working up from this basis, does he portray the complicated ideological, political and moral movements to which such changes inevitably give rise. (*Historical* 49)

Many novelists in the nineteenth century, including all those studied here, shared this understanding not only of how

history was evolving but also how it affected those living during a time of change. As social conditions evolved, the novel appears to have become the specific form that most clearly detailed the evolution of capitalist society and the Industrial Revolution. In fact, Igor Webb stressed the relationship between the English novel and the Industrial Revolution saying "that any novel written between roughly 1780 and the 1850s is necessarily an expression of and a response to the events we have come to call, somewhat narrowly, the Industrial Revolution" (9). If, as many argue, the Industrial Revolution is actually better seen as the acceleration of technological and economic forces that were put in motion hundreds of years earlier than the dates usually given, then we can truly say that the novel and industrial capitalist society developed together.

The financial and technological changes that together made the Industrial Revolution "one of the 'great discontinuities' in history mark the division between a world in which population, output and incomes rose slowly, if at all, and the modern world where populations, output and real incomes per head of population grow very quickly" (Lane 5). Within those sweeping changes, the expanding business of printing and bookselling helped make the novel the dominant literary form of the period and one result of this was that as

the novel became more important as a genre it seems to have come to include attitudes toward the world found previously in other forms such as comedy, melodrama, and tragedy. This may well be why there are so many problems trying to define the novel as genre. In fact, Claudio Guillén says that it "is typical of the novel that it should be or seem to be, almost impossible to define" (*Anatomies* 1).

One reason the novel would have been of interest to readers living during the Industrial Revolution is that as a literary form it dealt with many of the same urgent political, social, and moral issues as did periodical publications, and it is important to note that the evolution of the periodical parallels the development of the modern novel. In fact, many of the canonical novels of the nineteenth century, including most of those discussed here, were published first in serial form. These and other novels would have appeared in the same issues of periodicals with essays on the important concerns of the day, including discussions of political, commercial, and social change. (See Williams, *Culture & Society*.) The new scientific knowledge, the geographic discoveries, the political and social changes all provided subject matter not only for magazines and newspapers but also for the novel, which continued to tell us more about something we are all

very interested in, ourselves. What Guillén says of the novel today would have been true for the nineteenth-century reader:

We are readers of novels because we feel there is no subject about which we know less than man himself. We may control ever vaster areas of precise knowledge, branches of science, forms of expression and historical information, but human relations appear to the novel-reader each day more problematical. (*Anatomies* 27)

These preliminary remarks are meant to show that the novel did become increasingly important in the cultural life of people living in the nineteenth century, not only as entertainment but also as a resource in the public struggle to understand what was happening in society. Joseph W. Childers makes clear that in early Victorian England the novel, along with books about everything from philosophy to social problems, was part of the flood of information and interpretation which was "widely disseminated" and "essential to the shaping of industrial culture" (77). This publishing phenomenon was, of course, happening throughout Europe and the Americas. Readers and novelists shared the same cultural reality, which had everything to do with what some wrote about and what others were interested in reading about.

Many novels since the beginning of the genre can be seen as having been shaped by the the response of their authors to the history and values of the society in which they were written, but in the nineteenth century the active desire on

the part of writers to understand the history of their times took on a new importance. Balzac, for example, expressed his desire to record what he saw around him in his 'Avant-Propos' to *La Comédie humaine*, where he said that "La société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire" (5). ["French society would be the historian, I would only be the secretary" (my translations).] Of course, he knew that he was not simply writing down what was apparent to the secretary's eye. Rather, he believed that the writer should "méditer sur les principes naturels et voir en quoi les sociétés s'écartent ou se rapprochent de la règle éternelle, du vrai, du beau? . . . la société devait porter avec elle la raison de son mouvement" (6). ["meditate on the natural principles and see how societies stray from or approach the eternal rule, of truth, of beauty. . . Society should bring with it the reason of its movement."]

One cannot meditate on how society strays from or moves toward eternal values without making judgments, even if they are implied rather than stated, and it is obvious that Balzac and other nineteenth-century novelists were not simply taking notes from their observations but were also sincere and astute critics of the cultural reality they saw around them. The 'mirror' the realist writers supposedly held up gave a very personal reflection, or perhaps refraction, of society. Lukács

took a Marxist perspective on this and wrote that novels began to explore the "inhumanity of capitalism, the chaos of competition, the destruction of the small by the big, the debasement of culture by the transformation of all things into commodities" (*Historical* 26).

It is important to keep this analytical and judgmental aspect of the novel in mind because it is critical to an understanding of the novel's development to see how the form parallels the evolution of the social sciences in that it shows a heightened awareness of how society functions and how individuals live within what anthropologists today term 'culture': "the learned repertory of thoughts and actions exhibited by the members of social groups—repertories transmissible independently of genetic heredity from one generation to the next" (Marvin Harris, *Cultural* 47). Put differently, a culture is the total way of life of a people, and that includes religion, politics, language, social institutions, financial and legal systems, and all the ways of thinking and behaving we are taught. It is the web of reality that holds us in place and gives meaning to our very existence, and which we pass on to those who come after us. When critics or novelists consider 'history' in nineteenth-century literature, they are actually looking at the writer's understanding of culture as a concept. Williams points out

that the "organizing principle" of his *Culture & Society* is his personal discovery that "the idea of culture, and the word itself in its general modern uses, came into English thinking in the period which we commonly describe as that of the Industrial Revolution" (vii).

Novelists have shared in the evolving process of clarifying the concept of culture and what we now take as the canonical novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were being published at the same time as the classic works in the history of social science.<sup>2</sup> What novelists, philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists of the period have in common is an emerging desire to understand human culture as an integrated and dynamic system in which various elements interact. They all see culture not just as something outside of us and in which we act as individuals but rather as a force that molds each individual's attitudes and beliefs, his or her very way of being. In the novel, this reveals itself as an understanding that characters do not simply move through a neutral universe—everything around them, from political strife to the taste of food, has an influence on how they think, feel, and act. A simpler understanding of how the culture in which we live shapes our lives began at least as early as Plato, became more defined in the Enlightenment, and reached full development in the nineteenth century. Marvin Harris, in

fact, says "it is apparent that a nascent version of the concept and theory of *culture* was the major theme in the intellectual ferment that preceded the French Revolution" (*The Rise* 10, his emphasis).

For Harris, Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* set the stage for the subsequent development of the idea of culture and the "inescapable consequence of this doctrine is that different experiences, or, in modern terms, differential environmental exposure, will produce both individual and national differences in behavior" (*The Rise* 12). Locke argued that the human mind was like an 'empty cabinet' and that the "knowledge or the ideas with which the mind later comes to be filled are all acquired during the process of what we would call today enculturation" (*The Rise* 11). Rather than a direct influence on the novel, Locke is best seen as a clear indicator of ideas being developed in all areas of intellectual life, from nascent psychology to literature. Guillén sees this point clearly and has pointed out that like social science

[T]he situations of novels are based on this intimate meshing of the individual with the collective, the personal with the social. . . . [T]he novel deals essentially. . . with psychosociological patterns of action, with the tangle of inner and outer impulses which controls behavior: social success or economic ambition are only forms of this behavior, of predominantly sociological nature. (*Anatomies* 56-57).

In saying that the novel is related to the work of such thinkers as John Locke, we are saying that the novel comes to incorporate the idea that people get their ideas from experience, that their character is not fixed at birth and that what we do determines what we become. In the novels studied here the main characters all become something different from what they were when they were young. We can see clearly that "identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society" (Berger 174).

The inevitable influence of biological heredity is sometimes suggested as a latent factor but the figures in these novels are shaped more by the opportunities and problems presented by their culture, and in this case capitalism has a shaping effect on their culture's structure which in turn limits the possibility of individual choice. Making money changes them and comes to dominate their personality. Goriot, Lapham, Villaamil, Gesualdo, and Thomas Buddenbrook all come to some sort of awareness as to the role that making money has played in their lives. As Steiner pointed out the "world of prose is that in which money counts" (263). Although their understanding of their lives may be partial, we, as readers, can see clearly how they have all been locked in Max Weber's 'iron cage'.

During the years referred to as the Industrial Revolution, the historical dimension became more important in literature and some novels were now meant to allow readers "to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" (Lukács, *Historical* 24). There was a new "sense of history as not only the bearer but the active creator, the active destroyer, of the values of persons and relationships" (Williams, *The English Novel* 26). Again, it is clear that the use of the word 'history' here means the story of cultural change over time.

It is apparent that the novelists I am looking at were very interested in the evolution of society, in understanding 'existence as something historically conditioned,' and had serious historical and philosophical purposes when they came to choose the subjects for their novels. Balzac, Howells, Verga, Galdós, and Mann, had lengthy journalistic careers and wrote extensively about social issues and events and the social sciences. They all wrote what they saw as 'historical novels,' certainly about contemporary history and its impact on those living at the time, but also in Galdós's case an entire series of *Episodios Nacionales* about Spain's past history and its shaping effect on the nation's identity. By

their choice of incident and character, these writers worked to give a clear and analytical portrait of the society in which they lived.

What Alan Swingewood said of the novel in general applies to the novels studied here:

the novel, as the major literary genre of industrial society, can be seen as a faithful attempt to re-create the social world of man's relations with his family, with politics, with the State; it delineates too his roles within the family and other institutions, the conflicts and tensions between groups and social classes. In the purely documentary sense, one can see the novel as dealing with much the same social, economic, and political textures as sociology. (12)

My aim is simply to ferret out the relationship the authors tried to show between the lives of the characters in their novels and the wider culture of the time in which they lived, but detailing the exact nature of the relationship between individual life and cultural reality is never a simple matter. I emphasize how culture has shaped behavior but I believe I have also indicated how each individual's reaction has been shaped by personal characteristics.

Ian Craib makes it clear how difficult it is to separate cultural from individual factors in behavior. He says the most important aspect of any study in social science involves the author's attitude toward the fundamental question: Which is dominant in human social life, free decisions made by the

individual or the determining force of society on the individual choice? This dualism forces researchers to emphasize a particular aspect of human behavior, and by doing so to be open to the objection that one or the other side of the dualism has been ignored.

Craib points out "there can be no unified social theory, because the social world itself is not unified" (269). If this is true for social science in general, then it seems true for literature, and any attempt to develop specific cause-and-effect relationships must always have an element of uncertainty. The novelists discussed here face this fundamental dualism in sociological theory and within the fictional world of each specific work, the characters not only express a certain individual freedom but also respond to the constraints of the conflicting demands of specific and evolving social conditions. Individual decisions are shown not as simple free will choices but rather as complex socio-cultural events within a definite cultural and historical environment, as a complex interaction between individual aspiration and social context.

The characters in these novels see the world with certain presuppositions and act within the limits of those presuppositions, but they are caught within the limits set by their culture, which, although it sustains their lives,

sometimes puts them in situations where, because of who they are, the only possible result is tragedy.

### III

#### Tragedy, Ordinary Life, and the Novel

As literature evolved and came to include the lives of ordinary people, many critics discussed whether tragedy in any genre was possible under capitalism's new social, industrial, and economic order. For example, it has been said that the new mercantile society, with its prosaic emphasis on science, reason, and accounting, is a world in which the metaphysical basis which had made tragedy possible no longer exists. Steiner asserts that "After Shakespeare the master spirits of western consciousness are no longer the blind seers, the poets, or Orpheus. . . They are Descartes, Newton, and Voltaire. And their chroniclers are not the dramatic poets but the prose novelists" (193). For such critics, since the idea of the tragic can be picked to death by reason and has in fact lost touch with the great mysteries of the universe, tragedy is no longer possible.

I have already touched on various aspects of my perspective on this discussion but I feel it is important here to expand on some of my ideas to make it clear how I am approaching the novels I am considering.

First of all, this discussion of the very possibility of tragedy is only one more stage in the long history which the genre of tragedy has had, much of which is aimed at developing a set of essential and limiting characteristics. It all begins with Aristotle's classic definition that

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (61)

Over time, other efforts were made to reveal the essential nature of tragedy. Hegel argued for tragedy's importance being its part in the dialectic through which Spirit took on concrete form in the world. Hegel saw tragedy as presenting conflict in which "veritable tragic suffering . . . is suspended over active characters entirely as the consequence of their own act" and that "Over and above mere fear and tragic sympathy we have therefore the feeling of *reconciliation*, which tragedy affords in virtue of its vision of eternal justice" (*On Tragedy* 51). For Hegel, tragedy is dialectical and presents a conflict of opposing moral forces which leads to a higher level of being. However, Williams points out that "Hegel's interpretation of tragedy is part of a general philosophy, and is convincing or unconvincing as

such" (*Tragedy* 34). This seems to be true of many who would give a definition of tragedy.

Hegel's dialectical reasoning in turn influenced Marx for whom, Williams says, "social development was seen as necessarily contradictory in character, and tragedy occurs at those points where the conflicting forces must, by their inner nature, take action, and carry the conflict through to a transformation" (*Tragedy* 35). Although, the relationship between 'social development' and tragedy is clearly not dialectical in the novels studied here, it is apparent that all of the main characters are living at a period of great social change. Goriot and Gesualdo, for example, are living at a time when the rule of the aristocracy is giving way to the new capitalist democracy. Lapham and Buddenbrook see the commercial environment evolving rapidly and with tragic consequences for each. Villaamil is caught in the struggle between two political administrations.

A contemporary attempt to limit the tragic genre is Walter Kaufmann's definition in *Tragedy and Philosophy*:

Tragedy is (1) a form of a literature that (2) presents a symbolic action as performed by actors and (3) moves into the center immense human suffering, (4) in such a way that it brings to our minds our own forgotten and repressed sorrows as well as those of our kin and humanity, (5) releasing us with some sense (a) that suffering is universal—not a mere accident in our experience, (b) that courage and endurance in suffering or nobility in

despair are admirable—not ridiculous—and usually also (c) that fates worse than our own can be experienced as exhilarating. (6) In length, performances ranged from a little under two hours to about four, and the experience is highly concentrated. (85)

Kaufmann's approach seems most appropriate to my work, except for those traits which would limit it to drama. I have specifically taken from him the need to recognize the universality of suffering in human life and how that involves the fate of those who suffer because of social and economic forces beyond their control. As to what we learn from tragedy, I take his 'exhilarating' as indicating an energizing force in our lives which help us to resist the negative impact of the causes of suffering, and here that involves the power of money to shape our lives and commodify our relationships.

A definition which seems to catch the essential nature of the word as it relates to genre in ordinary usage is to be found in the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*:

Obra dramática cuya acción presenta conflictos de apariencia fatal que mueven a compasión y espanto, con el fin de purificar estas pasiones en el espectador y llevarle a considerar el enigma del destino humano, y en la cual la pugna entre libertad y necesidad termina generalmente en un desenlace funesto. (2006)

[A dramatic work whose action presents conflicts of a fateful nature that inspires compassion and fear, with the purpose of purifying these passions in the spectator and causing him to think about the enigma of human destiny, and in which the struggle between

freedom and necessity generally ends in a fatal conclusion.]<sup>3</sup>

I would only take exception with the word 'dramatic' as I think the novel can present a very clear example of tragedy in life. Otherwise, this definition seems to work well with any literary form, especially as it relates to a tragedy as being concerned with the 'enigma of human destiny'. However we define tragedy, and it is admittedly hard to develop an absolutely conclusive definition, many nineteenth-century novels seem to have come to embody the idea of the tragic, whether we restrict our discussion to form or to philosophy. It is interesting that Steiner says that his *The Death of Tragedy* does not provide a definition of tragedy but that "any neat abstract definition would mean nothing. When we say 'tragic drama' we know what we are talking about; not exactly, but well enough to recognize the real thing" (9). I would agree that when when we say 'tragedy,' we know what we are talking about, and in some cases it involves novels.

Further, a study of what many have termed tragic novels seems to me to show that tragedy can be presented in two ways in the novel. For example, in *Le Père Goriot* the story of the old man is only one thread in a very complex story with many narrative lines. Goriot's tragedy is imbedded in the work but is not identical with its main story line. It forms a story

within a story and can be seen to have a separate and clear structure within the overall scheme of the novel. Clearly, his life and death, if not modeled on *King Lear*, follow a similar artistic structure although the novel as a whole does extend back into the past and ahead into the future in time and space, diluting somewhat the intensity of the tragedy as we are taken away from Goriot's sufferings to follow the lives of other characters. The specific story of Goriot's misfortunes within the novel can be clearly delineated as having a structure that is very similar to what could be expected of a tragic play. Seeing tragedy in a novel in this way allows us to get around the objections of critics like Aristotle and Kaufmann who argue that the epic and the novel are too broad and diverse to include tragedy.

On the other hand, in *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*, for example, the central figure is almost always before us on the page and the emotional intensity of the work certainly seems to make the reading of the novel a more powerful and unified tragic experience. We follow the fate of one specific character very closely and even if we can locate elements of tragedy in the lives of other characters, Verga's intention is clearly to emphasize Gesualdo's rise and fall. The novel is the story of his tragedy.

Williams, whose *Modern Tragedy* is thought to have been his response to Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*, rejected any limiting definition of tragedy other than that it involves loss, suffering, and alienation. For him, tragedy is by nature a means of interpreting the reality around us so that we have a conceptual framework to interpret human experience and is not limited to any particular historical period or metaphysical stance. Tragedy places individual human beings in particular situations, but it gives the life of the reader or playgoer a greater and sometimes universal significance when that literary experience is shared. When we say that a specific situation is a 'tragedy,' we offer an explanation, an interpretation of experience. We are saying that this particular human life has certain characteristics which show how all of us are connected to a greater moral universe.

What Williams said of Greek Tragedy could certainly be applied to the nineteenth-century novels considered here: "What the form [of tragedy] then embodies is not an isolable metaphysical stance, rooted in individual experience but a shared and indeed collective experience, at once and indistinguishably metaphysical and social" (*Tragedy* 18). In the novels studied here, the suffering is individual, but it results from a collective and social situation. The characters make individual choices, with at least some semblance of

independence, but their fates are determined by social conditions, including accepted ideas as to ultimate values. The classic idea of fate or destiny as an element in tragedy is supplanted by the idea of social and economic forces controlling behavior or in other cases merely limiting the possibility of individual choice.

One of Steiner's main points is that the "tragic personage is broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome by rational prudence" (8). In the novels studied here, the tragedy is that the cause of the suffering can be understood and could be avoided under other circumstances. The 'tragic figures' discussed here do seem to act freely and bring tragedy upon their own heads with the decisions they make. But even though their decisions seem to reveal free will, every choice takes place in a constraining and limiting social environment, and if that environment had been different, then their lives would have been different.

Tragedy in literature, like religion, helps us to deal with the sometimes harsh and painful reality of the world. "Tragedy speaks essentially to the mind and the spirit, and its effect is *like* that which believers get from religious ceremonies intended to cleanse the spirit" (Ferguson 35). Even if the reality it shows us is painful, tragedy does put order in what is around us. It helps us to make sense of the world

and prepares to go on with our lives. In fact, Eva Figs has pointed out that although the laws broken in tragedy "are regarded as cosmic or divine, they are in fact human laws, and have to do with the way society orders itself, or the way society believes itself to function" (145). By sharing in the tragic experience, we learn about ourselves and our society and this explanatory aspect of tragic literature was prominent in the nineteenth-century novel.

The tragedies in these novels were meant to make moral statements and to point toward a better way of life, not just in spirit but in action. Emile Durkheim, among others, has pointed out a similar function for religion, which can be seen not only as expressing a society's most important values but also orienting its members within their social reality, to define their identity within the universe. "The believers. . . sense that the true function of religion is not to make us think, enrich our knowledge, or add representations of a different sort and source to those we owe to science. Its true function is to make us act and to help us live" (419).

Although tragedy in literature may function like religion, it is important to note that the vision of tragedy of the writers studied here is completely secular and does not relate clearly to a religious or metaphysical level of being. In these novels, the moral universe is made up of

relationships between people and not relationships between people and some other level of metaphysical or religious meaning. The tragedy in these novels occurs at the level of family and personal relations. The tragic protagonists violate traditional values related to how they should deal with family members and other personal relationships. To varying degrees, they come to treat others as abstractions and to make money more important than other people, and they suffer for this. The historical reality of the moment shapes their lives, limits their choices, until at the end, they find themselves with no escape.

Specifically here, I will be looking at tragedy as it relates to a contradiction in the capitalist belief system, that is, that making money is good and that money should bring happiness. That money did not necessarily bring happiness is the point of contradiction at which tragedy is born, and here there is at least some clear, even if partial, cause put forth for human suffering. All the principal figures in the novels I am studying accepted the dominant values of their society and believed that money could bring happiness, and when it did not, they had to face this contradiction, with varying consequences. However, I see no suggestion that the sacrifice of the tragic figure will bring about some renewal of social values.

These tragedies are meant to clarify or reveal the state of society, but not necessarily to give the reader some sense of comfort that all will be well. Each character does achieve a moment of recognition, some awareness of how he has allowed his life to be controlled by outside forces, and in some cases the realization comes with total disillusionment. The problem for each is that the tragedy can be seen as an almost logical outcome of the way in which each has chosen to live his life.

In his essay "On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture", Georg Simmel writes that

In general we call a relationship tragic—in contrast to merely sad or extrinsically destructive—when the destructive forces directed against some being spring forth from the deepest levels of this very being; or when its destruction has been initiated in itself, and forms the logical development of the very structure by which a being has built its own positive form. (43)

The characters discussed here define themselves in terms of the money they have made and the social position it has given them. At one point in their lives each has given himself totally to the idea of making money or defined himself in the terms of his position in society and expected this to bring him happiness. When this fails, when money is not enough or when he can no longer earn enough money to meet his business and family obligations, we see that each man's "destruction has been initiated in [himself]". He set the rules and defined

himself in such a way that his very being leads to destruction. When the values he has lived by crumble, his life becomes meaningless.

As noted above, many writers in various disciplines shared the belief that there were situations which were tragic in nineteenth-century European capitalism. The capitalist credo that making money is a good in itself is a key point of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*. He looked at this idea by deriving an 'ideal type' which exhibited the desired theoretical points even though this construct did not exist in its clearest sense in the real world. Weber argued that it was impossible to draw clear boundaries for 'ideal types' in 'historical reality' and that "we can only hope to understand their specific importance from an investigation of them in their most consistent and logical forms" (*Ethic* 98).

The novelists studied here took various individuals as similar 'ideal types' to use as keys to unlock their societies. Even though the novels studied here tell unique stories which contain complex, rounded individuals, not stereotypes, all have central male characters who share a grouping of various elements, including having sole responsibility for earning the family's money, suffering stress and disillusionment from an often harsh economic

competition, and allowing calculation to become a part of their human relationships with a resulting alienation from others. Interestingly, they also all have daughters or sisters and have to contend with the financial and social factors that come into play when there is a marriage.

Weber traces the idea that making money is a good in itself back to the Calvinist idea of predestination, which held that whether one was destined for salvation or damnation had been determined before the world began. A belief in this idea could cause a certain amount of anxiety as the believer had to wonder whether he would be saved or not, but he could see evidence of salvation by living in a way that pointed to a heavenly future, and this involved renouncing worldly pleasures and dedicating oneself to material prosperity which was seen as a sign of salvation. The "innerworldly asceticism of Protestantism" (*Sociology* 588) provided capitalism with an ethical form of conduct and made a career in business legitimate. Making money in capitalist society came to be the "result and the expression of virtue and proficiency" (*Ethic* 54). The idea of a calling, of the moral value of making money, became all-important for those who were unsure of salvation. Weber wrote that

it is unmistakable, that even in the German word *Beruf*, and perhaps still more clearly in the English *calling*, a religious conception, that of a task set

by God, is at least suggested. The more emphasis is put upon the word in a concrete case, the more evident is the connotation. (*Ethic* 79)

Under these Calvinist influences, worldly success provided proof of salvation and became a rational adding up of accounts, a spiritual accounting, which could be called upon at any moment. However, even though Weber argued that the capitalist belief structure can be traced back to Calvinism, it is clear that the novels considered here contain very little of the overtly religious. Weber understood that and argued that the religious asceticism and validation of this way of life had been worn away by Enlightenment humanism but that the moral importance of having a calling to the business world had remained as a cultural value. The spiritual struggles of the principal characters in the novels studied here are secular in nature, but sometimes seem to take the form of religious doubt. The agonized self-examination of Goriot, Lapham, Gesualdo, Villaamil, or Thomas Buddenbrook has all the intensity of the cloistered mystic struggling with his doubts about the nature of god. They constantly question the moral nature of their lives and the value of the things they do. We, as readers, can see that they have been locked in Weber's 'iron cage' and that there is no way out.

Although the ideas in Weber's classic work are still discussed, they have been challenged, primarily by Marxist

thinkers, but when his ideas were published, in 1905, it was clear that they were closely related to the approach that had already been taken by many novelists of the nineteenth century. Weber and the novelists were looking at the same cultural changes and saw that making money was more than just the drive for a better life or for financial security. It was an activity with a value all its own, almost a compulsion, but one based in a complex belief system which had become all pervasive. The characters themselves often seem unaware that there are alternatives to the decisions they make.

In arguing for the importance of such central ideas as the value of making money in the development of culture, Weber seems to counter Marx, who held that the forces of production are basic in determining the structure of society. However, Weber specifically says that it was not "my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history" (*Ethic* 183). For him, both approaches were valid but each could only serve as a starting point for an investigation.

Ideas about the value of making money did not determine society's future but they could lead some to act like economic units operating in a cold materialistic world. "The growing impersonality of the economy on the basis of association in

the market place follows its own rules, disobedience to which entails economic failure and, in the long run, economic ruin" (Weber, *Sociology* 585). The rational nature of capitalist society required that those who wished to succeed in that society had to calculate gain and loss, and this rationality in behavior is a key Weberian concept:

Weber essentially used the term rationalization to describe the process by which nature, society and individual action are increasingly mastered by an orientation to planning, technical procedure and rational action. . . In the economic sphere, for instance, rationalization involved the organization of commercial practices by means of technical rules calculated to produce profits by the use of rational accounting methods. (Ken Morrison 218)

All of the novels I am looking at have major characters who accept completely the idea that market relations and monetary calculations are appropriate guides for relationships between human beings, at least in the public sphere but often even in the family. Repeatedly, every human relationship, family, parenthood, marriage, friendship, is subjected to a rational calculation involving gain and loss.<sup>4</sup>

A clear case of this calculating aspect of relationships takes place in the opening pages of *Buddenbrooks* when Thomas Buddenbrook's father is discussing with his own father what to do about his stepbrother's letter requesting an immediate share of his inheritance. Gotthold, son of the first wife who has died and therefore a stepbrother to Thomas's father, had

married beneath him against the family's wishes. After exact calculation as to what granting his wish for this share would cost the firm, with only some passing reference to family duty, the two decide to ignore his letter. The moral obligations of father and brother were considered, but then overruled by the business needs of the firm.

Simmel had noted similar aspects in the money economy and contrasted the "more impulsive, emotionally determined character of earlier epochs" to the calculating nature of the nineteenth-century money economy, which leads us to carry over the "necessity of continuous mathematical operations" to other aspects of our lives (*Philosophy* 444). For Simmel

Social interaction is seen as an exchange of representations (such as money—something which stands for something else), and truth—like value—is to do with a relation of representations to each other. Society is thus a combination of exchange relations between individuals, it is in constant movement, and money, as it emerges from economic exchange, embodies this constant movement. It is as if money becomes the symbol which represents everything. (Craib 152)

It is clear that the protagonists in the novels considered here also fail tragically in the exchange value of their transactions with other people. They attach high value to the money they have made but often allow it to play too important a role in the relationships in their lives. They monetize all aspects of their existence and often believe they

can pay for love and respect, but when they give up the money they have worked so hard to earn, they receive little of value in exchange.

We can also say that many of the family members of the main characters here showed no gratitude for what they had been given, and gratitude is another important concept in Simmel's sociology. Simmel argued that economic exchanges in public life are usually enforced through the legal system, but for all incurred obligations in our day-to-day existence it is gratitude that builds the social bond. Gratitude "establishes the bond of interaction, of the reciprocity of service and return service, even where they are not guaranteed by external coercion" (*Sociology* 387). Simmel formulated the sociological theory for a major theme in the books I am looking at.

Although Silas Lapham's family relationships are not marked by this negative aspect of personal relations—his family members are grateful for what he gives them—Goriot, Gesualdo, Villamil, and Buddenbrook often get no gratitude for the money and position they provide. Repeatedly, they give and calculate gains and losses in even the most intimate family moments, and those they help or give money to show little gratitude. The result of this is often anger and even more alienation and some end their lives in bitter resentment because what they have done has not been appreciated by those closest to them.

This introduction has provided the basic concepts which I will now use to try to show that the novelists I am looking at were interested in portraying how the intrusion of capitalist culture into the lives of ordinary people could lead to suffering and tragedy.

#### End Notes

1. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981, p. 342; *He Knew He Was Right*. Oxford: OUP, 1998, p. 546; *Gobseck*. *Balzac: Oeuvres Complètes*. Vol 3. Chambéry: La Société des Études Balzaciennes, 1957, p. 483. *A New Voyage Around the World by a Course Never Sailed Before*. New York: AMS Press, 1974, p. 312
2. A glance at what was being published from 1690 to 1873, to select only a number of important works, will make this point clear: John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690; Giambattista Vico's *Scienza nuova* 1744; Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*, 1748; Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759; D'Holbach's *Système de la nature*, 1770; Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, 1830-1842; Tocqueville's *Démocratie en Amérique*, 1835; Friederich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1845; Volume one of Marx's *Capital*, 1867; E.B Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, 1871; and Herbert Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*, 1873.
3. *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1992, p. 2006)

The first entry in a selection of definitions from several reference works indicates that 'tragedy' is used to indicate a literary genre but the requirements, at least for a definition, are not nearly so exigent as what we get from the theorists who strive to limit the word's meaning. Other entries give the everyday usage for the word. Here are a few definitions of what constitutes a tragedy in literary terms:

*The Oxford English Dictionary*. Vol. XVIII. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 360.) The first entry for tragedy reads "a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion." The third entry has "an unhappy or fatal event or series of events in real life; a dreadful calamity or disaster."

*The American Heritage College Dictionary*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993, p. 1434). The first entry for tragedy reads: "A drama or literary work in which the main character is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, esp. as a consequence of a tragic flaw, a moral weakness, or an inability to cope with unfavorable circumstances." The third entry gives the word in its common usage, "A disastrous event, esp. one involving distressing loss or injury to life."

*Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française*. (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert, 2001, pgs. 1367-1368). The first entry for 'tragédie' reads: "Oeuvre lyrique et dramatique en vers, née du dithyrambe, représentant, à l'aide d'acteurs masqués et de chœurs, quelque illustre infortune empruntée au mythe ou à l'histoire et propre à exciter la terreur ou la pitié; le genre dramatique auquel appartient ce type de pièce."

*The Brockhaus Wahrig Deutsches Wörterbuch*. (Stuttgart: F.A. Brockhaus, 1984, p. 267). The first entry for 'Tragödie' has "(Grund)form des Dramas, die einen unvermeidlichen od. unausgleichbaren Gegensatz gestaltet, der zum Unterliegen, zum Untergang des Helden führt; Sy Trauerspiel."

*Il Nuovo Zingarelli della Lingua Italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1984, p. 2028). The entry for 'Tragèdia' reads "Genere fondamentale del teatro drammatico, caratterizzato dalla solenne narrazione de fatti gravi riguardanti personaggi importanti e dallo scioglimento luttuoso della trama."

4. Such commentaries on the economic impact of money on human relations in the nineteenth century were not limited to works of literature or sociology. In 1843, in *Past and Present*, Thomas Carlyle says "We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that Cash-payment is not the sole relation of human beings, we think, nothing doubting,

that it absolves and liquidates all engagements of man" (148) and again "Cash payment is not the sole nexus of man with man,--how far from it! Deep, far deeper than Supply-and-demand, are Laws, Obligations sacred as Man's Life itself "(187). Carlyle was looking at the relationship between owners and employees in industrialized England, but his work shows clearly that he saw this as a general problem throughout the society in which he lived.

## CHAPTER 2

### *LE PÈRE GORIOT*

#### I

#### Background

Erich Auerbach has written that Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), "seized upon the representation of contemporary life as his own particular task and, together with Stendhal, can be regarded as the creator of modern realism" (468). Balzac would have been satisfied to be described in this way because he clearly saw himself as being a part of the developing intellectual tradition which viewed society as an evolving and interrelated whole. *La Comédie humaine* was the title he gave to the series of almost 100 novels he wrote that were meant to give fictional form to the history of his time. Balzac not only

places the human beings whose destiny he is seriously relating, in their precisely defined historical and social setting, but also conceives this connection as a necessary one: to him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops all its several milieux. (Auerbach 473)

Balzac was born in Tours and spent most of his childhood in boarding schools. His father was a civil administrator who

profited from the revolution enough to make him and his family financially comfortable. His mother appears to have been unhappy in the marriage and given to moodiness and dabbling with the occult. Balzac's family moved to Paris in 1814 and he completed his secondary education there and began studying law. In 1819, the year when the events told in *Le Père Goriot* begin, Balzac gave up the study of law to become a writer.

After a series of potboiler novels published under pseudonyms, Balzac showed signs of what was to come with such works as *Les Chouans*, based on events during civil war in Vendée, and *La Physiologie du Mariage*, a witty, satirical look at marriage, both published in 1829.

In 1830, Balzac published *L'Usurier*, later titled *Gobseck*, a novella containing several of the characters that would reappear in *Le Père Goriot*. The earlier work, told in a casual manner by the attorney Derville as a cautionary tale for a friend's daughter, details the time when Anastasie de Restaud sold the family diamonds for money for her lover Count Maxime de Trailles. The usurer who gives his name to the tale tells the young attorney "si vous aviez vécu autant que moi, vous sauriez qu'il n'est qu'une seule chose matérielle dont la valeur soit assez certaine pour qu'un homme s'en occupe. Cette chose . . . c'est L'OR. L'or représente toutes les forces humaines" (475). ["If you had lived as long as I have, you

would know that there is but one sure reality certain enough for a man to be involved with, and that is--Gold. Gold represents all the human strengths".] Obviously, the theme of money's power in society interested Balzac his entire life and was to take shape in numerous works, in addition to the one studied here.

With *La Peau de Chagrin*, a study of temptation and disillusionment which appeared in 1831, Balzac had his first commercial success, and in 1834, he began publication of *Le Père Goriot* in serial form. This signaled a new stage in his literary career which was to be marked by incredible literary production, considerable success, repeated financial failures involving ill-conceived business ventures and reckless spending, and complicated romantic involvements.

Although written and published 1834-1835, the story told in *Le Père Goriot* begins in 1819 when France is in the midst of a fierce struggle to establish a new national identity which would incorporate both the monarchical past and the political reality following the revolution. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the victors had returned the Bourbon Louis XVIII, the executed king's brother, to the throne. But even with a new king there was no way back to pre-revolutionary times. The "émigré aristocracy. . . demanded indemnities for their losses, the return of their properties,

and renewed privileges of all sorts. At the same time, the Industrial Revolution was taking hold in France and a wealthy new commerce-based bourgeoisie was emerging. A struggle between the two groups was inevitable" (Kanes, *Anatomy* 3). Society was in transition and there was often confusion as to what was expected in personal, business, and class relations. The volatility of the class and financial structure is clear in *Goriot* as all the characters must fight for a place in the changing society. In one instance, Madame Beauséant complains to Rastignac about the "pauvres bourgeoises qui, en prenant nos chapeaux, espèrent avoir nos manières" (118). ["stupid shopkeepers who put on hats like ours and think they'll start acting like us, too" (63).] <sup>1</sup> The aristocrat is upset by those who do not know their place, but those who formed the commercial class now see themselves as the aristocrats' equal.

In 1824 Louis XVIII died and was replaced by Charles X "under whose reign the Restoration government became increasingly conservative, increasingly repressive, and increasingly out of touch with the times" (Kanes, *Anatomy* 5). Unhappiness with this new ruler led to the 1830 revolution which forced him from power and led to the installation of Louis-Philippe, who seemed to understand the social and economic changes that had taken place and worked to win over the commercial middle class.

In 1834, France was entering a new age of laissez-faire capitalism in which the fierce pursuit of money was triggering a moral crisis. Social and cultural bonds which had once rigidly held society together had been strained with shifting power relations, often tied to the vicissitudes of the new fortunes which were to be made during and following the revolution. Much of the tension in the novel comes from the fact that in spite of the massive and increasing forces pushing for social change, "In many respects . . . the economic and social structures of the ancient régime survived until the 1840s" (Price 143). Balzac had the advantage given by hindsight and *Le Père Goriot*, which is not a long work, manages to give a glimpse of practically every aspect of the dynamic French culture of the time, from the direst poverty to the new wealth, from the restored aristocrats to the new business elite.

## II

### A Reading

The novel opens appropriately enough for a masterwork of formal realism with a detailed description of the pension 'Maison Vauquer'. Many of the principal characters live there and much of the action will be centered there. The pension has seen better days. It has "l'odeur de pension. Elle sent le renfermé, le moisi, le rance" (47). ["the pension smell. It is

a stale, musty, mouldy scent" (8).] and the dining room is filled with "meubles indestructibles proscrits partout, mais placés là comme le sont les débris de la civilisation aux Incurables" (48). ["utterly indestructible items of furniture, banished from all other houses, but deposited here just as civilization's wreckage is deposited at Hospitals for the Incurable" (9).]

There are seven boarders living in the pension and each one has an important role to play in the novel: Madame Couture is the widow of a military paymaster and has taken on the care of Victorine Taillefer, the estranged daughter of a wealthy man who has disowned her because he suspects she may be the result of his wife's adultery; the grey haired Poiret and an old maid Madame Michonneau; the intriguing and mysterious Vautrin; Père Goriot; and Rastignac, a law student who was sent by his parents to study in Paris. Though only seven in number Balzac tells us: "Une réunion semblable devait offrir et offrait en petit les éléments d'une société complète" (58). ["Such an assemblage should and in fact it does present us, though in a small compass, with the components of a complete social structure" (16).] As the story unfolds, all of these characters interact in a complex story and Balzac tells us that "ce drame n'est ni une fiction, ni un roman. *All is true*, il est si véritable, que chacun peut en reconnaître les

éléments chez soi, dans son coeur peut-être" (44). ["this drama is not fictional, it's not a novel. *All is true* {in English in the original} - so true you'll be able to recognize everything that goes into it in your own life, perhaps even in your own heart" (6).] Specifically, each character plays a part in the relationship between Rastignac and Goriot.

The way the guests are treated at the Maison Vauquer immediately takes up the theme of the power of money in society. Boarders who can pay more have comfortable and attractive lodgings closer to the ground floor. Those boarders who cannot pay as much are moved up the stairs to less desirable rooms. As Goriot falls in life, as his mind and body deteriorate, he is moved higher and higher in the pension until at the end, penniless, he dies in a small, squalid attic room. At the end, even the funeral arrangements, including the religious services, are seen to be monetized relationships. In *Le Père Goriot*

Money is treated as a basic constituent of life, as the fundamental element of modern urban life, and in Balzac's insistence on the details of its accumulation and dispersion lies a large part of what he has to say in this novel about French history as it was lived in daily life. *Old Goriot* shows us people who earn, spend, lose and worry about money; and it shows us people living in a world of things. (Bellos, *Old Goriot* 53-54)

Here, of course, I am focusing on the character of Goriot and arguing that Balzac meant his individual story to be taken

as a tragedy. As pointed out before, the form of tragedy, the rise and fall of a basically good man, could form a separate story line in the novel and be one aspect of the writer's interpretation of social reality. Goriot's story is crucial to the development of all aspects of the novel and even though it is actually only one thread in this novel, we can see how Balzac saw the old man's life as illuminating for the rest of the work. For Balzac, Goriot is clearly the 'ideal type' of the ignored and abused father who is seen strictly as a source of money.

Whether his story can legitimately be viewed as a tragedy has much to do with how we see him, that is, what is the moral and personal stature of Goriot the man? The work begins *in medias res*, as so many tragedies do, and the Goriot we see at first is almost a figure of fun, a broken old man, more pathetic than tragic, who appears to lack the necessary stature for the work to be called a tragedy. However, if we read closely all that is written about Goriot's life before he came to the pension, it is clear that he is presented as having been someone of considerable, if unequal, abilities and personal qualities and that his story is indeed an "obscure, mais effroyable tragédie parisienne" (*Goriot* 129). ["little-known but dreadful Parisian tragedy" (71).]

Goriot is given tragic stature as a character and Balzac apparently intended his story to be compared to King Lear's. However, the work is a novel with a variety of themes and personages and not a play and Rastignac, Vautrin, Goriot's two daughters, or their husbands are clearly not meant to be tragic figures in the same way that Goriot is. They may at times be noble, immoral, shallow, suffering, deluded, or avaricious but their lives lack the necessary elements, the necessary moral qualities, the clash of ideas, which would make their lives a tragedy. There is also no real sense of finality in their fate in the novel. We are left wondering what will happen to them, and Balzac purposely does not conclude their stories. We do not have the sense of structure that is needed for their lives to be considered tragedies.

This novel was apparently the first work in which Balzac conceived of the idea of repeating characters in his novels and Goriot's story is just one part of a work which, with the other novels of *La Comédie humaine*, was to give a broad and not necessarily tragic vision of the society of his times. I have already pointed out how in *Gobseck* Balzac introduced several of the characters who appear in this novel. Eagleton considered all the novels of *La Comédie humaine* and wrote:

Honoré de Balzac is no doubt the greatest imaginative sociologist of all, yet his fiction is strewn with tragedies: the vengeful malevolence of

cousin Bette, the persecution of the unworldly Pons, . . . the Lear-like humiliation of Goriot. . . , Yet these warped, blighted lives help to compose a Human Comedy, not a tragedy, since the emergent bourgeois society to which they belong is still robust, extravagant, even heroic-'comic' in the sense of swarming with God's plenty and offering readers this pullulating diversity of life-forms for their delectation. (*Sweet Violence* 184)

I agree in general with Eagleton but, obviously, I feel that although *La Comédie humaine*, taken as a whole, may or may not represent a tragic view of the world, I choose to emphasize the fact that Balzac's fiction is 'strewn with tragedies,' that within that 'pullulating diversity' there are true tragedies and that the story of Goriot is one such example of the tragic suffering of an individual who must contend with massive cultural change and personal crises. However, even if his other characters are not meant to be tragic, they most definitely are shown as having to contend with a myriad of social and cultural problems. They all, like Goriot, are shown to be fixed in a definite historical moment.

Goriot is the tragic figure, the one whose death reveals most clearly the heartless materialism of Parisian society, but his final days are closely linked with the changes in Rastignac's prospects for the future. Goriot succeeded in business but the novel is the story of how his fortunes decline. Rastignac's fortunes, on the other hand, rise during the novel and show promise of rising even higher in the

future, especially after he comes to accept the idea that he will only be successful if he can get the help of a rich and powerful woman.

The relationship between Goriot and Rastignac is the central thread of the novel, and every contact they have with every other character involves money. As Festa-McCormick said, it seems clear that in this novel the "unifying force is money" (68).

Balzac details the setting, as noted above, and gives us only hints about Goriot, leaving the puzzle of his true identity to be discovered during the course of the book, while he details Rastignac's first attempts to enter the fashionable world. Through a distant cousin Madame La Vicomtesse de Beauséant, Rastignac comes in contact with Goriot's two daughters: Anastasie de Restaud, who has been giving large sums of money to her lover Count Maxime de Trailles, and Delphine de Nucingen, recently abandoned by her lover de Marsay. The daughters' relationships with their husbands, their lovers, and their father have much to do with getting and spending money. Even Rastignac's cousin's lover the Marquis of Ajuda-Pinto, will leave her to marry a younger woman with a huge dowry. From the first pages, it is clear that "an unbroken chain of gold links all the major characters in the novel" (Lock 26).

There is a clear moment when Rastignac sees the nature of the world he is trying to enter. He looked at Madame Beauséant's lover and realized that to succeed in this new world he would need money and "Le démon du luxe le mordit au coeur, la fièvre du gain le prit, la soif de l'or lui sécha la gorge" (107). ["The demon of luxury gnawed at his heart, the fever of moneymaking seized him, the thirst for gold dried out his throat" (54).]

Having realized the importance of wealth, Rastignac is immediately tested as to how far he will go to get money when Vautrin tells him about Mademoiselle Taillefer's problems with her father and how his money will be left to her brother after the father's death. Vautrin proposes a unique solution: he would have someone challenge the brother to a duel and kill him so that the father would be forced to reconcile with the girl as she was his only heir. Rastignac could marry her and acquire the huge fortune she will inherit and would then give Vautrin a share so he could carry out his plans of buying a plantation in America and living off the work of his slaves. Rastignac rejects the offer and Vautrin laughs at Rastignac's scruples and explains:

Paris, voyez-vous, est comme une forêt du Nouveau Monde, où s'agitent vingt espèces de peuplades sauvages, les Illinois, les Hurons, qui vivent du produit que donnent les différentes chasses sociales; vous êtes un chasseur de millions. Pour

les prendre, vous usez de pièges, de pipeaux, d'appeaux. Il y a plusieurs manières de chasser. Les uns chassent à la dot; les autres chassent à la liquidation. . . Celui qui revient avec sa gibecière bien garnie est salué, fêté, reçu dans la bonne société. (148)

[You see, Paris is like some great forest over in America, where there are twenty different tribes of Indians, Illinois and Huron and the rest, each of them living a life that's structured by a completely different sort of hunting, and what you're hunting is millions. If you're going to catch them, you have to use traps and snares, decoys and lures. There are all sorts of ways to hunt millions. Some go after dowries; some look for estates being settled. . . Any hunter who comes back with his bag stuffed full is welcomed, celebrated, received by high society. (87-88)]

Although he does not agree to be a part of this plot, this cynical attitude is actually the same attitude that will eventually come to guide Rastignac's pursuit of success. He will come to see Parisian society as 'une forêt du Nouveau Monde' in which he will become a 'chasseur de millions'.

At the end, both daughters are still hounding Goriot for more money: Delphine's husband has taken control of her fortune and Anastasie has sold the family diamonds to pay her lover's gambling debts. The stress of hearing about these problems causes Goriot to suffer a fatal stroke. Rastignac is one of a handful of people to attend his funeral. His daughters send their coaches but do not attend. After Goriot is buried, Rastignac issues a challenge to Parisian society from the heights of the Père Lachaise cemetery that he will

succeed no matter what. He then goes to have breakfast with Madame Nucingen, who he believes will provide his way to wealth and power.

This briefest of sketches shows clearly the role of money in the work and what makes Goriot a tragic figure has much to do with his relation to money. In this, of course, he is not alone as all the characters are defined at least in part as to how money affects their relation to one another. Mademoiselle Taillieffer's relationship with her father and brother is based on money. Poiret and Michonneau betray Vautrin for money. Vautrin's position in the criminal world is based on the trust the criminals have in him to manage their money. And of course the lives of Goriot and Rastignac are determined to a large extent by the quest for and the lack of money. Even at the end, when Goriot lies on his death bed, Madame Vauquer, in spite of her friendly words, is concerned only about the payment of the rent and the cost of the sheet which will be used to wrap his dead body.

Goriot's identity in the novel is tied to his financial history. We are told about his past, before the main action of the novel begins, when he first became wealthy by taking advantage of shifting historical conditions to make money in the grain market. When times change, his life deteriorates, not directly because the changes lead to his losing his money

but because they affect how he chooses to use the money he has. He makes the decisions, in a particular historical context, that lead to his tragic end but the tragedy grows out of his own identity. As the novel says, when such an individual is caught by history, "Le char de la civilisation, semblable à celui de l'idole de Juggernaut, à peine retardé par un coeur moins facile à broyer que les autres et qui enraye sa roue, l'a brisé bientôt et continue sa marche glorieuse" (44). ["Civilization's high-riding chariot, like the believer-crushing car of the idol Juggernaut, barely slows down when it comes to a heart a bit harder to crack, and if such a heart gets in the way it's pretty quickly smashed, and on goes the glorious march" (5-6).]

There is conflict in a historical moment and it is in that clash of values and ideas that tragedy is born. Not only has there been a major war that has swept across Europe but there is also the struggle for power between the rising commercial and financial class and the older aristocracy. As Williams pointed out, these are the sort of historic moments of which Marx said that "tragedy occurs at those points where the conflicting forces must, by their inner nature, take action and carry the conflict through to a transformation" (*Tragedy* 35).

This, of course, is consistent with the new vision of culture in the nineteenth century of seeing individual lives as being embedded in particular historical situations as opposed to the sufferings of the isolated, noble, and powerful individual in a static society of those works we might take to be classical tragedy, for example, *Oedipus* or *Macbeth*. As Auerbach said, referring to Old Grandet of *Eugenie Grandet* but writing what is obviously pertinent to Goriot, he as other such characters in nineteenth century realism "are not mere caricatures. . . but terrible realities which must be taken wholly seriously; they are involved in tragic complications, and not withstanding their grotesqueness are themselves tragic" (31).

The initial inspiration for *Le Père Goriot* may have been a story that Balzac heard about as having happened in Paris. He wrote in a notebook about an idea for a story: "Un brave homme - pension bourgeoise - 600 fr. de rente - s'étant dépouillé pour ses filles qui toutes deux ont 50 000 fr. de rente - mourant comme un chien" (Guichardet 9). ["a good man - bourgeois pension - 600 francs income - being stripped bare by his daughters who between them have 50,000 francs income. Dying like a dog."] However, even if the novel grew from this note about an actual occurrence, the similarities between the novel and *King Lear* are obvious. "*King Lear*, of course, was to

provide a basic image of *Le Père Goriot*; in fact, its presence is so obvious that Balzac was accused of near-plagiarism" (Kanes, *Anatomy* 4). Regardless of exactly how the idea for the novel came to Balzac, this simple idea for a story gave him the vehicle to dissect the moral failings of the society he saw around him. The key point in both *King Lear* and *Goriot* is that both old men give away their financial independence.

There is an important difference between *King Lear* and *Goriot* which calls to mind Marx's ideas about the evolution from feudal to capitalist society. In *Lear*, the land produced wealth which was controlled by the feudal class hierarchy and when the old man gave away his land, he gave away the source of his wealth. In *Goriot*, the characters take advantage of any aristocratic influence they may have, but the most important source of wealth and power is whether they are able to tap into the stream of money in the capitalist economy.

Goriot's wealth came originally from commerce and then later from money he had invested so that he could live off the income. Madame Vauquer one day "avait bien vu, de son oeil de pie, quelques inscriptions sur le grand-livre qui, vaguement additionnées, pouvaient faire à cet excellent Goriot un revenu d'environ huit à dix mille francs" (60). ["had also spotted some registered bonds that, quickly totted up in round figures, surely provided this excellent old man with an income

of something like eighteen thousand francs a year" (18).] After providing his daughters with dowries and then selling his bonds and cashing out his investments to continue to give them money, Goriot was reduced to selling his clothes and silverware to find money to live and to give the women the money they continued to ask him for.

*Le Père Goriot*, as a work, lacks the clear tragic structure of Shakespeare's great play. It is open at both ends and the story extends backwards and forwards with memories of past events and promises of future complications that the drama does not emphasize. Goriot is an individual with a will of his own but everything he does, every decision he makes has been shaped not only by some inner act of will but to a greater or lesser extent by external events and historical conditions.

If this has set the groundwork for defining Goriot, "ce Christ de la Paternité," (246) [this Paternal Christ" (164)] as the central figure in a tragedy, then we must ask is he the 'highly renowned and prosperous' personage that Aristotle described as a tragic figure? In the tragic novel we may have to make some allowances for the social changes that have taken place since Aristotle. As Jeannette King points out

Aristotle certainly suggested that the character in tragedy should be 'good', that is the finest of their type or class, and that the hero in particular

should be 'highly renowned and prosperous'. The novelist, therefore, who chooses to make his hero a common man is faced with the problem of finding compensating factors for the loss of the (symbolic) values that derive from the hero's identification with the fate of his people. (4)

Balzac does provide us with 'compensating factors'.

Goriot is not renowned but we are told that before his troubles began he was a prosperous, attractive, vigorous man who projected a virile power. He is certainly presented as being someone with the stature necessary for a tragic hero in a commercial society, at least at the beginning. Early on, when he first came to the boarding house, "Goriot vint muni d'une garde-robe bien fournie, le trousseau magnifique du négociant qui ne se refuse rien en se retirant du commerce" (59). ["He had arrived with a well stocked wardrobe, the magnificent clothing of a merchant who, retiring from all commercial activity, could deny himself nothing" (17).] He was a strong man who was, according to Madame de l'Ambermesnil, "un homme sain comme mon oeil. . . un homme parfaitement conservé, et qui peut donner encore bien de l'agrément à une femme (62) ["He's every bit as strong as he looks. . . and so well preserved: He's certainly still capable of giving a woman a good time" (19).] He was powerfully built and even after his troubles had begun was capable of bending his silverware into bars to be sold for money for his daughter. At the beginning

of his life in the pension, it is clear he was not a broken old man. He was attractive and took great care with his appearance. He was still able to make a good impression on the older ladies.

But, if Goriot is a tragic figure in what I think Williams would term a 'bourgeois tragedy,' his status would also have to have something to do with his ability to succeed in capitalist society and we are told that Goriot had been very astute in his business dealings. I will quote at length here as to what Rastignac was able to find out about Goriot:

Goriot était, avant la Révolution, un simple ouvrier vermicellier, habile, économe, et assez entreprenant pour avoir acheté le fonds de son maître, que le hasard rendit victime du premier soulèvement de 1789. Il s'était établi rue de la Jussienne près de la Halle-aux-Blés, et avait eu le gros bon sens d'accepter la présidence de sa section, afin de faire protéger son commerce par les personnages les plus influents de cette dangereuse époque. Cette sagesse avait été l'origine de sa fortune qui commença dans la disette, fausse ou vraie, par suite de laquelle les grains acquirent un prix énorme à Paris. . . Pendant cette année, le citoyen Goriot amassa les capitaux qui plus tard lui servirent à faire son commerce avec toute la supériorité que donne une grande masse d'argent à celui qui la possède. Il lui arriva ce qui arrive à tous les hommes qui n'ont qu'une capacité relative. Sa médiocrité le sauva. D'ailleurs, sa fortune n'étant connue qu'au moment où il n'y avait plus de danger à être riche, il n'excita l'envie de personne. Le commerce des grains semblait avoir absorbé toute son intelligence. S'agissait-il de blés, de farines, de grenailles, de reconnaître leurs qualités, les provenances, de veiller à leur conservation, de prévoir les cours, de prophétiser l'abondance ou la pénurie des récoltes, de se procurer les céréales à

bon marché, de s'en approvisionner en Sicile, en Ukraine, Goriot n'avait pas son second. A lui voir conduire ses affaires, expliquer les lois sur l'exportation, sur l'importation des grains, étudier leur esprit, saisir leurs défauts, un homme l'eût jugé capable d'être ministre d'État. Patient, actif, énergique, constant, rapide dans ses expéditions, il avait un coup d'oeil d'aigle, il devançait tout, prévoyait tout, savait tout, cachait tout. (125)

[Before the Revolution, Jean-Joachim Goriot had been a simple vermicelli worker, skillful, thrifty, and sufficiently enterprising to have bought up his employer's business, when in 1789, by pure chance, the man became a victim of the first uprising, Goriot set up shop on Jussienne Street, near the Wheat Market, and had the great good sense to accept the presidency of his revolutionary section, which allowed him to draw on the influence of some of the most powerful men of that dangerous time, and thus protect his business. This wise stroke had been the foundation of his fortune, which began to accrue during the Great Hunger (whether it was a real famine or not), as a result of which wheat in Paris soared to enormously high prices. . . This was the year when Citizen Goriot amassed the capital which, later, allowed him to conduct his business with all the advantages conferred on anyone thus richly endowed. What happened to him, indeed, was what happens to all men with no more than a certain limited ability: his mediocrity became his salvation. Besides, no one knew about the fortune he'd accumulated until there was no longer anything dangerous about being rich; he aroused no one's envy.

And his business had apparently absorbed every bit of his mind's capacity. What concerned him was wheat, and flour, and grain leavings, knowing what they were good for, where they came from, how to make sure they did not spoil, how to anticipate the market, predicting harvest surpluses or scarcities, how to obtain grains at a good price, how to lay in stocks from Sicily, from the Ukraine, and in all of these matters Goriot was second to no one. Had you seen him doing business, explaining the laws governing the export trade, and the import trade,

penetrating to their very core, taking every possible advantage of their loopholes, you might have thought him capable of becoming a Government Minister. Patient, lively, energetic, stable, his commands flowing freely and rapidly, he oversaw everything with an eagle eye, he anticipated everything, he predicted everything, understood everything, concealed everything. (68-69)]

It seems clear that Goriot was, even according to an Aristotelian approach, a potentially tragic figure, in a sense, I would say, forming part of a self-made post-revolutionary commercial nobility. We will see this pattern repeated in all the novels discussed here. Horatio Alger did not invent the myth of the poor boy making good; it was a staple of European literature before America's Gilded Age.

Unfortunately, outside of his business, "il redevenait l'ouvrier stupide et grossier, l'homme incapable de comprendre un raisonnement, insensible à tous les plaisirs de l'esprit" (126). [he became no more than a plain, stupid workman, the sort of man who could not follow a logical argument, deaf and dumb to all the pleasures of the spirit (69).] The one bright thing in his life was his wife, whom he adored, and when she died he, in turn, became extremely attached to his daughters and strove to satisfy their every whim.

His troubles begin, as the Duchesse de Langeais tells Rastignac, after he had married these two daughters to men from a higher station. "Vous comprenez bien que, sous

l'Empire, les deux gendres ne se sont pas trop formalisés d'avoir ce vieux Quatre-vingt-treize chez eux; ça pouvait encore aller avec Buonaparte. Mais quand les Bourbons sont revenues, le bonhomme a gêné M. de Restaud, et plus encore le banquier" (115-116). ["You understand, I'm sure, that under the Empire these two sons-in-law didn't mind having this old Revolutionary around: that sort of thing was perfectly all right, under Bonaparte: But once the Bourbons were back in power, the old man began to bother Monsieur de Restaud, and bothered the banker even more" (61).]

The enforced separation from his daughters because of the differing social classes which he and his sons-in-law inhabit and the exigencies of the historic moment accelerate his fall. Of course, he had from the beginning made errors relating to the way he reared his daughters and to how he handled his money. He spoiled his daughters completely and had married them to rich men they apparently did not love. We have no clear textual evidence that they were not happy with the arrangement, at least at first, but perhaps as a father Goriot should have chosen better for them. We can assume that he was impressed with the social world that his money had given him access to and wanted to see his daughters established in that world. Later, when the moral decay and personal sufferings of the daughters become apparent, his desire to give them

everything only intensifies. His declining fortunes make it impossible for him to satisfy their demands for money and the resulting suffering leads to his physical and mental decline.

In his fourth year at the boarding house and after the privations he has suffered in trying to buy his daughter's love

il ne se ressemblait plus. Le bon vermicellier de soixante-deux ans qui ne paraissait pas en avoir quarante, le bourgeois gros et gras, frais de bêtise, dont la tenue égrillarde réjouissait les passants, qui avait quelque chose de jeune dans le sourire, semblait être un septuagénaire hébété, vacillant, blafard. Ses yeux bleus si vivaces prirent des teintes ternes et gris-de-fer, ils avaient pâli, ne larmoyaient plus, et leur bordure rouge semblait pleurer de sang (69).

[you would not have recognized him. The sixty-two-year-old merchant who didn't look a day over forty, the stocky, stout bourgeois, as healthy as any animal, whose vigorous manners had delighted passersby, such youth glowed out of his smile, seemed to have become a bewildered dotard of at least seventy, wobbly, wan. His lively blue eyes turned a dull steel-gray, they'd grown pale, never watered any more and their red rims looked as if they might weep blood (24-25).]

Simmel's ideas on the tragic are key here and Goriot would be a clear example of a character whose tragedy is caused by the way he has defined himself at the deepest levels of his being. Goriot accepts the ruling philosophy of the commercial and social world in which he lives. He would agree with what Vautrin had told Rastignac that "la fortune est la vertu!" (120), ["Money is virtue" (64)] and says "L'argent,

c'est la vie. Monnaie fait tout" (258) ["money is *life*. It can do everything" (175).] His belief in the power of money and his monetization of his relationships with his daughters leads to his tragic end. Goriot has defined himself as a man with money. He profited from the revolution, but when times changed, he could not adapt to the new world, and the juggernaut rolled over him and continued on its way. At the end, he came to understand that money had been the basis of all his problems with his daughters.

But what exactly is Goriot's tragic error? There is continuing disagreement over the exact meaning of *hamartia* and Kaufmann says it apparently can be either a 'tragic flaw' or 'intellectual error' but that "it is less important, and in any case impossible to decide, whether Aristotle was thinking more of a moral flaw or of an intellectual error, than it is to learn from the Greeks how inseparable these two often are" (62). Obviously, one key failing that Goriot has is his turning his relationships with his daughters directly into a monetary one. Kanen points out that Goriot "acts as if dispensing affection and dispensing money were the same thing. His attempts to monetize affection lead only to the ruination of his daughters, to their terrible marriages and finally to his own ghastly end" (Anatomy 42).

It is pertinent here to at least mention the possible psychoanalytical factors involved as to why Goriot makes the decisions he does regarding his daughters. For example, we can look at the development of his relationship with his daughters as erotic substitution following the death of his wife. We are told specifically that "le sentiment de la paternité se développa chez Goriot jusqu'à la déraison. Il reporta ses affections trompées par la mort sur ses deux filles, qui d'abord satisfirent pleinement tous ses sentiments" (127). ["Goriot's paternal feelings grew and grew, almost to the point of madness. His passionate love for his wife, defeated by death, was transferred to his daughters, and at first they gave him all the emotional satisfaction he could want" (70).] His love for his daughters becomes mixed with his belief that money is able to do all. He tries to express his love with money but his love for his daughters is affected by specific social circumstance.

Then, of course, after his daughters marry, Goriot violates one of the main ideas behind a capitalist ethos, specifically that exchanges must benefit both sides. In *Goriot*, as Prendergast points out

from the large-scale gesture to the petty gesture, and cutting across all social boundaries (aristocrat, banker, student, landlady, ex-prostitute, policeman, criminal), the model for conduct remains morally identical, that of exchange,

a continual trafficking in relationships and values in the pursuit of private gain. . . The model or metaphor of exchange constitutes, therefore, a major focus for the 'totalizing' vision of the novel; it is, so to speak, one of the lamps with which the narrator guides both reader and hero through the mysteries of the Parisian 'labyrinth' towards an understanding of its interconnected moral design.  
(77)

Goriot continues to give his daughters money but gets little in return. He wants to exchange money for love but the deal is not completed. The money he gives his daughters encourages them in turn to mishandle their money. They exchange it for their own pleasure and emotional satisfaction but are not satisfied with the results. Within the moral universe of the novel we see clearly that in handling his money, he should have made better bargains and gotten full value for what he paid out. From his daughters he should have demanded better treatment and from life in general he should have been more careful in his behavior. If capitalist society turns all human relations into commodity exchanges, then we must be careful to make good deals. He has, as we see in his recognition scene at the end, given up his role of father as moral guide or patriarch and taken on the simple role of supplier of money. The exchange of money becomes the only true relationship he has with his daughters and he fails them and himself in accepting that limited relationship.

He has been overly, one might say pathologically, attached to his daughters and this has led him to try to give them everything, everything, that is, in terms of money, even to the extent of depriving himself. He says, "N'est-ce pas mon sang? J'aime les chevaux qui les traînent, et je voudrais être le petit chien qu'elles ont sur leurs genoux" (154).

[“She’s my own flesh and blood, do you see? I love the horses that pull them; I’d love to be the little dog they hold on their laps” (93).] and “Ma vie, à moi, est dans mes deux filles. Si elles s’amusent, si elles sont heureuses, bravement mises, si elles marchent sur des tapis, qu’importe de quel drap je sois vêtu, et comment est l’endroit où je me couche” (167). [“For me, life is my two daughters. If they’re having a good time, if they’re happy, if they’re all dressed up, if they get to walk on carpets, what difference does it make what kind of clothes I wear and what sort of room I lie down in” (103).]

The text makes clear that his vision of what makes a good father is based almost exclusively on the giving of money. “Les pères doivent toujours donner pour être heureux. Donner toujours, c’est ce qui fait qu’on est père” (243). [“To be happy, fathers must always be giving, and giving. Always giving: that’s just what you do when you’re a father” (162).] And later, “Allons, je dois mourir, je n’ai plus qu’à mourir.

Oui, je ne suis plus bon à rien, je ne suis plus père! non. Elle me demande, elle a besoin! et moi, misérable, je n'ai rien" (268). ["All right, so I have to die, the only thing I can do is die. Yes, I'm no good anymore, I'm not a father! No. She comes and asks me, she needs my help! But me, miserable wretch, I have nothing left" (183).] If one defines oneself in monetary terms, when the money runs out, the definition is canceled. If a father is someone who gives money, then when Goriot has no more money then he is no longer a father and it is time for him to die.

It is on his deathbed that we see Goriot's recognition of the true character not only of his relationship with his daughters but also as to how he has failed them. First, he is hurt by their refusal to come and see him and realizes that his daughters are only interested in him for money: "si j'étais riche, si j'avais gardé ma fortune, si je ne la leur avais pas donnée, elles seraient là, elles me lécheraient les joues de leurs baisers!. . . Si, j'avais des trésors à laisser, elles me panseraient, elles me soigneraient" (293-294). ["Ah! If I'd been rich, if I'd kept my fortune, if I hadn't given them everything, they'd have been here, they'd be polishing my cheeks with their kisses. . . If I were rich and I could leave [my money] to them, they'd have taken care of

me, they'd have looked after me" (203).] But the fault is not entirely the girls', it is his, as he sees clearly later:

Elles sont innocentes, mon ami! Dites-le bien à tout le monde, qu'on ne les inquiète pàs a mon sujet. Tout est de ma faute, je las ai habituées a me fouler aux pieds. J'aimais cela, moi. Ça ne regarde personne, ni la justice humaine, ni la justice divine. Dieu serait injuste s'il les condamnerait a cause de moi. Je n'ai pas su me conduire. J'ai fait la bêtise d'abdiquer mes droits. Je me serais avili pour elles! Que voulez-vous! Le plus beau naturel, les meilleures âmes auraient succombé à la corruption de cette facilité paternelle. Je suis un misérable. Je suis justement puni. Moi seul ai causé les desordres de mes filles, je les ai gâtées. Elles veulent aujourd'hui le plaisir, comme elles voulaient autrefois du bonbon. Je leur ai toujours permis de satisfaire leurs fantaisies de jeunes filles. (296-297)

[That's what they are, my friend, they're innocents! Make sure everyone knows that, so no one bothers them on my account. It's all my fault, I got them used to walking all over me. I liked that, I really did. No one should pay any attention, it's not a matter for human justice, or for divine justice, either. God Himself would be unjust if He condemned them because of me. I didn't know how to behave, I committed the stupidity of abdicating my own rights. I would have utterly degraded myself, anything for them. What can you do! Some of the most beautiful best-endowed souls in the world have succumbed to the corruption of such paternal indulgence. And now I'm miserable, I've been properly punished. All this chaos in my daughters' lives, I'm responsible for it all, I spoiled them, I ruined them. All they want, now, is pleasure, just the way they used to want candy. I always let them have whatever their girlish minds wanted. (205)]

That Goriot recognizes his failings has been noted by many critics. Bellos says that "the flashes of insight the old man has in his last moments into the nature of his daughters

and himself render his suffering properly tragic" (*Old Goriot* 4) and Claudia Lacour says the "drama of Goriot dying, its violent mental schism between lie and truth [is] a benchmark in modern tragic representation" (34-35). The recognition of the moral and tragic significance of Goriot's death within the work is clear when Rastignac continues the pathos, the scene of suffering at the end. After being with the old man, he says

Il y a un Dieu! Oh! oui! il y a un Dieu, et il nous a fait un monde meilleur, ou notre terre est un nonsens. Si ce n'avait pas été si tragique, je fondrais en larmes, mais j'ai le coeur et l'estomac horriblement serrés. (300)

[There's definitely a God. Oh yes, yes! Either there's a God and He's made a better world for us, or this world of ours makes no sense at all. If it weren't so tragic, I'd be dissolved in tears, but even as it is in my heart, my stomach, they're tied up in knots (207-208).]

Regardless whether Goriot truly comes to fully understand the cause of his ruined life, the importance of money in the work cannot be overemphasized and the reader certainly understands the tragedy of his having based his role as a father on money and of his failed exchanges of value. The importance of money and exchange transactions is obvious and forms part of the tragic framework of the novel. It is how money affects human behavior that allows us to see the novel as detailing the changing fortunes of the two main characters: Goriot and Rastignac. As Goriot deteriorates in the novel,

Rastignac grows stronger. Goriot has been the somewhat blind recipient of good historical fortune. He was the right man at the right time and prospered. He made decisions about making money but in a sense he was an opportunist and his new wealth did not bring with it any guide as to how to handle his wealth later in life.

Rastignac, on the other hand, has consciously set out to make his fortune. He is a poor provincial who begins the study of law but sees rather quickly that the legitimate avenues that he had once thought would lead to success, hard work, dedication, character, will lead to nothing. He must use the influence of his lovers and their contacts to make his way in Paris. There are at least two clear disillusionments here: Goriot's and Rastignac's. Vautrin, it appears was right: money is all.

While Goriot mentally and physically deteriorates and then is finally buried, Rastignac, ironically, rises and is last seen high on a hill looking down on the city. The novel ends with Rastignac's challenge to the city, "A nous deux maintenant!" (313). ["Now it's just the two of us!" (217).] Words constituting a promise that from now on, he will be at the end of a sequence of exchanges from which he will profit. One can assume that any money he spent out of affection to

help Goriot during his last days is probably the last such money he will spend in his life.

In summary, Goriot, the man, serves as a nexus of various tragic threads in the novel but it is clearly his personal story that Balzac meant to be the "obscure, mais effroyable tragédie parisienne." The other elements of the tale lead us off along other paths through *La Comédie humaine*. As Bellos says, "Seen as an interpretation of history, *Goriot* is not a tragedy of the aristocracy in decline, or a tragedy of the bourgeois defeated by his own creation, or a tragedy of the destruction of family bonds: it is a tragedy of all three at once, all three broken by the rule of money" (*Old Goriot* 79).

Balzac must be seen as one of the first novelists to see clearly how the pursuit of money, the importance of money, in a capitalist society could lead to the monetization of human relations. Goriot's story is clearly a new kind of tragedy and the structure of his rise, disillusionment, and fall will be repeated in the other novels in this study.

#### End Notes

1. For English translations from the text of *Le Père Goriot*, I have used Burton Raffel's translation (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994). Any other translations from the French are mine.

## CHAPTER 3

### *THE RISE OF SILAS LAPHAM*

#### I

#### Background

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was born in Martin's Ferry, Ohio, in a rural area that had only recently been part of the frontier. He wrote about his early life there in *My Year in a Log Cabin* (1893). Howells was largely self-educated, schools of the region being limited in quality and the family not having the money for college, but he was widely read and acquired at least a reading proficiency in German, Italian, French, and Spanish.

He worked as a printer's apprentice on his father's newspaper and by age 21 was a reporter for the Columbus *Ohio State Journal*. He began publishing poetry and in 1860 a campaign biography of Lincoln prompted the administration to award him the consulship in Venice, where he stayed throughout the war. In 1865, he became editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in Boston and had success with a book about his stay in Venice, *Venetian Life* (1866). His first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, appeared in 1872.

Howells left the magazine in 1881 to concentrate on fiction and produced a series of early novels that were

"amusing, urbane, freshly observed domestic comedies" (Schlesinger xii). However, his interest in American society in general, and in its social problems in particular, began to change the subjects he chose to write about. He was familiar with most major European writers and saw himself as approaching the novel in the established realist tradition, especially as exemplified by the work of Turgenev, and wrote frequently of the need to portray life and people as they really were. "The virtue of the novel, according to him, lies in its formal amplitude, its ability to encompass all things and connect all mankind" (Dimock 75).

He also saw the novel as having a role in teaching its readers how to live a moral life, much, of course, as Tolstoy did. Even though he was not so free in his social criticism as some European authors he had read, he did oppose the inane works of contemporary literature that did nothing to help a reader's understanding. Sewall, the minister in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* who seems at times to be Howells' moral voice, refers disparagingly to "the novels that befoul and debauch almost every intelligence in some degree" (213).

Howells began reading Tolstoy in 1885 and this may well have played a part in the way his works began to show a deeper interest in the social injustice which was apparent in the United States, in spite of the nation's great wealth. Whatever

the cause, his "own rise to affluence and social position seemed to be accompanied by a corresponding rise in his social conscience" (Eble 93). The turmoil and inequities of America's 'Gilded Age' gave him plenty to write about.

In fact, in Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* the chapter heading for the years 1877-1900 is titled "Robber Barons and Rebels." Zinn points out that the political and economic elite, as well as the workers, participated in the "greatest march of economic growth in human history" (247), but often at considerable cost to those not in that elite. This era of American history, as Howells became increasingly aware, was marked by unprecedented economic growth, poor and often dangerous conditions for workers, and terrible injustice.

For example, during the Haymarket riots in Chicago in 1886, a bomb was thrown by an unidentified assailant that killed six policemen. Five anarchist leaders were arrested for the crime even though they had merely been speaking at the rally during the attack. They were convicted: one of them killed himself in prison and four were hanged. Howells was shocked by this incident but failed in an attempt to enlist other writers on behalf of the anarchists. He wrote that the execution had been a "civic murder" (quoted in Schlesinger xiii). This event seems to have had an impact on Howells and

his "novels during the years following the Haymarket crisis were to examine the theme of man's duty to his fellow men more intensively but less hopefully" (Pizer 83). A similar deadly labor dispute inspired by a street-car strike in New York in 1889 was to be a pivotal incident in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

The two novels looked at in this chapter take place in one of the most dynamic periods of national economic history. Samuel Eliot Morison points out that although as late as 1879 industry in the United States was based on the extraction of raw materials, by 1900 the nation was one of the world's leading manufacturing powers. However, the development was not constant nor was it without conflict. There were financial panics in 1873 and 1893, and the laissez faire attitude of the nation's industrialists and government led to violent strikes by workers who wanted a more equitable share of the unprecedented prosperity. Donald E. Pease points out that *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, written after the United States had gone from being "an agrarian to an industrialized nation" clearly shows the differences "between the restraint of self-made men and the unrestrained self-interest of laissez-faire individualists" (Introduction 15).

This was the era of the great trusts and monopolies, of financial tycoons, and labor agitation. Although we see little of the labor unrest in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, published in

1885, the fierce and characteristic financial competition is clear. Further, the railroad monopoly referred to in the novel was a common problem as individual railroads were given exclusive rights on lines they served and were free to charge as much as they could because there was no other source of transportation.

## II

### A Reading

*The Rise of Silas Lapham*<sup>1</sup> has the tragic structure that I show to be a part of the other works I consider here. Lapham begins life in modest circumstances and rises through good fortune and astute business decisions to a position of social prominence. However, his pride leads him into a series of poor decisions and his life reaches a point of moral and financial crisis. He loses his money and is forced to spend the remainder of his life back where he started, but he does not die. Because of this, the novel's vision of life is not as dark as we see in the other works studied here, but I think the novel is nonetheless a tragedy in form and meaning and, apparently, so did Howells. Consider this passage from the novel concerning the aftermath of Lapham's financial failure, which I take to be relevant to Howells' theory of tragedy:

Our theory of disaster, of sorrow, of affliction, borrowed from the poets and novelists, is that it is incessant; but every passage in our own lives and in

the lives of others, so far as we have witnessed them, teaches us that this is false. The house of mourning is decorously darkened to the world but within itself it is also the house of laughing. Bursts of gayety, as heartfelt as its grief, relieve the gloom, and the stricken survivors have their jests together in which the thought of the dead is tenderly involved, and a fond sense, not crazier than many others, of sympathy and enjoyment beyond the silence, justifies the sunnier mood before sorrow rushes back, deploring and despairing, and making it all up again with the conventional fitness of things. Lapham's adversity had this quality in common with bereavement. It was not always like the adversity we figure in allegory, it had its moments of being like prosperity, and if upon the whole it was continual, it was not incessant. (269-270)

We can see here that in Howells' theory of the novel tragedy might not be a final catastrophe but rather a drawn out and muddled sort of misery, even including moments of humor, perhaps more tragic because death may bring no escape from the unhappiness resulting from the final catastrophe. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* clearly has the form of tragedy in that there is a central figure who rises to new power during the work only to fall victim to a reversal of fortunes. He falls from prosperity and comes to a deep recognition of the mistakes he has made in his life, and the pathos in the novel's closing scene is clear. If, as Ferguson wrote, the tragic recognition requires that "in the light of hindsight, we see the truth of what we have been doing" (13), then clearly Lapham achieves that vision of the truth at the end of the novel.

To better understand the tragic nature of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, it is useful to look briefly at Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*,<sup>2</sup> published in 1890, and see that there the reader is given an imbedded tragedy involving a wealthy businessman but that it too has no clearly fatal conclusion.

In the later work, which is perhaps more sharply attuned to the social issues of the day, Dryfoos, although not the central character in the novel, is obviously meant to represent the harsh capitalist of the Gilded Age. He is a darker version of Silas Lapham and his fate will be even more unhappy. Dryfoos's fortune, like Lapham's, rests on a chance occurrence, in this case the discovery of natural gas on his Indiana farm. Following that stroke of luck, which provides him with capital, his unwavering instinct for buying and selling increases his fortune and makes him an extremely wealthy man, one who calculates every move as to profit and loss and without any sentimental considerations.

The tragedy of his life stems directly from the fact that due to the proud blindness brought on by his new wealth, he prevented his son Conrad from becoming a clergyman, seeing that calling as not suitable for someone in his son's position. Conrad took a job that was more to his father's liking but became involved in social causes intended to improve the lot of the poor and working class in New York.

This interest in the poor and apparent opposition to the interests of the wealthy led inevitably to a heated quarrel in which Dryfoos loses his temper and strikes his son. Conrad leaves him at that moment only to be killed shortly thereafter while trying to help Lindau, a German socialist who was being attacked by a policeman attempting to break up a strike.

Dryfoos loses his son and the sorrow over his death reveals his human side. He will live the rest of his life with the memory of their last violent moments together. Shortly thereafter, Lindau also dies and Dryfoos, although he had once scorned the old man, insists on having the funeral at his home. It was clear to March, another figure in the novel, that Dryfoos was "darkly groping, through the payment of these vain honors to the dead for some atonement to his son, and he imagined him finding in them such comfort as comes from doing all one can, even when all is useless" (454). As the novel ends, we are told that Dryfoos's sufferings were "a sort of perpetual torment. What was apparent to another was that he was broken by the sorrow that had fallen upon him" (461).

He is broken, but he does not die. There is no escape from the tragedy he has brought upon himself and he will have to live with the memories of what he has done. Unlike Lapham, he does not lose his money but it is clear that his great prosperity simply does not have the same value for him as

before his son's death. He has run into the contradiction I noted before, namely, that money does not necessarily bring happiness, especially when the pursuit of money interferes with our understanding of and feelings for the important people in our lives. Dryfoos disappears from the novel on his way to Europe where, although he will certainly receive the welcome reserved for the wealthy American visitor, it is clear that while he lives he will never be free of his son's memory and the guilt he feels for his death. The novel offers no final solution for the problems of laissez faire capitalism or labor injustice, but, specifically, there is no doubt about "the wrongness of Dryfoos's pursuit of money" (Bennett 42).

The events in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* clearly tie Howells' ideas about tragedy to what we see in the later novel. We see Lapham's initial rise to wealth, if not from poverty, most certainly from obscurity and humble circumstances, and then, a turning point which involves a series of moral and business decisions that lead to bankruptcy. His financial fall, however, represents a moral rise, therefore the significance of the title. Lapham must live with the failure of his business enterprise but with the bitter-sweet knowledge that he failed because he made the right moral choices. The point I am stressing here again is that the form of tragedy became a way of interpreting social

reality. Howells sees the rise and fall of Lapham, a not particularly prominent American businessman, as being as important a story as any other tragedy involving those in a higher social class because of what it reveals about humanity. Lapham is that 'ideal type' of Gilded Age capitalist who has profited from the opportunities of an expanding capitalism, and with him as central figure, Howells is able to show how money had penetrated the values of his society. As Bromfield Corey points out in the novel, "there's no doubt but money is to the fore now. It is the romance, the poetry of our age. It's the thing that chiefly strikes the imagination" (56).

I have emphasized the ability of the authors studied here to show how society functions as a system and all the authors here show that 'ideal type' of moneyed individual as being a part of such a system. It is interesting to note that Howells was aware of what was being done in sociology. He reviewed Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* in 1899 and pointed out how the new leisure class provided American authors with new opportunities for fiction. This sociological aspect of his work was not always appreciated by critics. An anonymous reviewer in 1885 said that Howells

studies men and women as a naturalist does insects. We read his book on the manners, habits, sensations, nerves of a certain set of people as we might a treatise on the coleoptera. And he investigates and expounds his theme with the same soullessness and

absence of all emotion. (From an anonymous review quoted in the appendix to *Lapham* 405-406).

He was criticized for his work, much as other realist and naturalist writers were criticized, and it does seem clear that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was first of all an attempt to show what was really happening in the society of the times and that critics who looked to the novel as a vehicle for beauty and enlightened sentiments could find much to criticize. Howells faces this conflict and has several characters speak disparagingly of the romantic novel *Tears, Idle Tears* in his novel. For Howells one of the first goals of literature was to show ordinary life as it was, something which he did not find in much contemporary writing. For example, he has a guest at a dinner given by the Coreys comment that

the commonplace is just that light, impalpable, aërial essence which [novelists have] never got into their confounded books yet. The novelist who could interpret the common feeling of commonplace people would have the answer 'to the riddle of the painful earth' on his tongue. (179)

Howells was aware of what was being written in Europe and wanted, at least to a degree, to follow Naturalism's goal of having the author be a detached observer of life rather an intrusive commentator on a novel's events. Aside from the obvious subject matter and interest in social issues which show Howells' sociological side, he has the two men in the Corey family display some of that cultural awareness which

they might have gleaned from contemporary works of anthropology or sociology, or at least from thinking about the differences between the New and Old Worlds, something which was common at the time.

Young Corey had gone to Texas for a while and says that he now judges Lapham with different standards than before because "I suppose that in a new country one gets to looking at people a little out of our tradition" (57). The older Corey responds:

I am always saying that the Bostonian ought never to leave Boston. Then he knows—and then only—that there can be no standard but ours. But we are constantly going away, and coming back with our convictions shaken to their foundations. One man goes to England, and returns with the conception of a grander social life; another comes home from Germany with the notion of a more searching intellectual activity; a fellow just back from Paris has the absurdist ideas of art and literature; and you revert to us from the cowboys of Texas and tell us to our faces that we ought to try Papa Lapham by a jury of his peers. (58)

Again this is in keeping with Howells' ability to see how society functioned as a system and how any change in one area, even in an individual life, would lead to changes in other areas of that life or in society as a whole. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is, at least in part, a study of the clash of cultures between the established old wealth of Boston and the *nouveau riche* of the Gilded Age. And as we see elsewhere, the point of contact between the classes is money and marriage. When the

Coreys discuss their son's marriage to the "paint princess" (84), they discuss it in terms of money and class and sentiment has little to do with it for them.

Howells' theory of society obviously involves attempting to make some sense of the interplay between individuals and the culture in which they live. This is a difficult task, given that the impact of individual will or societal pressure on human actions is not always easy to delineate. In part, this explains his emphasis on how individual moral responsibility should be seen within the context of the possibilities offered by chance and cultural pressure. For example, in this novel, it is best not to make overly rigid claims as to Lapham's moral nature or what Howells is trying to say in terms of judging contemporary American society. Pease points out that Lapham acts in different ways in different situations, and this adds a note of ambiguity to any final judgments about the moral nature of Lapham's decisions or the nature of capitalist competition. "He was self-sacrificing in the plot he shared with Jim Millon's widow and daughter, self-aggrandizing in his business transactions with Rogers, self-deprecating in his relations with Boston society, and self-destructive to his own character" (Introduction 20).

We have seen that Howells was later to look more closely at the dark side of the laissez faire capitalist in Dryfoos,

but even there it is questionable to extrapolate from the incidents in that novel to wider judgments about capitalist society as a whole. After all, the West Virginia company of young entrepreneurs destroys Lapham's company, but not out of any malice or cruelty, and their actions are never really questioned. Lapham feels the pressure of their growing business but he sees nothing wrong in their competing so harshly. It was simply that they had a good product and a cheaper source of gas to produce the paint. We read that a

strange, not ignoble friendliness existed between Lapham and the three brothers; they had used him fairly; it was their facilities that had conquered him, not their ill-will; and he recognized in them without enmity the necessity to which he had yielded. (310)

The harsh competition and abuses of capitalism as seen in Lapham's forcing Rogers out of the company and then Rogers' desire to defraud the group of English investors are not shown to be necessary aspects of capitalism but rather individual moral choices in specific circumstances. However, even though Lapham showed great sympathy for the workers at his production plant, he does not think twice about closing the plant, and putting all the workers out of a job, when he comes under pressure. The economic system seems to call forth certain situations in the novel which involve individual action and

broader judgments about how to solve society's problems are left open.

One aspect of this openness is that many of the novel's events seem to be the result of chance. But even when a chance event sets the action in motion, there is the obvious interplay between free will and determinism because the results of a chance event in human life are shaped by how those involved react to the opportunity. This is related to the recurring discussions as to the nature of fate in tragedy. For example, Lapham's fortune rests on a chance event, his father's accidental discovery on the family farm of a metallic deposit, an iron oxide, that when mixed with the appropriate oil makes an extremely durable paint. But at first, his father was not able to make the discovery pay, and it was not until Lapham returned from the Civil War and took a partner with capital that the business became profitable.

However, when the business was on the point of becoming profitable, Lapham forced his partner out, for reasons which are never quite clear, even though he and his wife come to regret the action. Obviously, the partner was crucial to the development of the company and Lapham may not have succeeded without him, but it is possible that the partner, who later plays a role in Lapham's moral rise, "didn't know anything about paint" (16) and that forcing him out of the company was

the correct business decision. However, Lapham's guilt over this decision to rid himself of a partner contributes to his downfall.

The importance of chance in Lapham's life is even greater when we learn that while in a battle in the Civil War he had apparently been saved when a soldier under his command was killed by a bullet intended for him. He reacted to this by taking financial responsibility for the man's wife and daughter. His pride in his own personal qualities and his company is understandable, but whether it has been chance or those qualities that have made him successful is one of the recurring questions of the novel. Lapham does occasionally acknowledge the importance of the part chance has played in his life, but usually only to assert soon thereafter that his success is truly the result of his business skills and hard work. He says that he had his "fair share of luck in this world" (9), and often credits his wife with helping him, but on other occasions he makes it clear that he feels that it is only his skill and hard work that have made him a success.

Coupled with his inordinate pride is his habit, especially at the beginning of the novel, of judging everything in terms of money, of constant calculation, as to dollars and cents. This shallow materialistic aspect of his character is clear from the text. The new house he wants to

build will be better because it will be expensive to build, "like ordering a picture of a painter. You pay him enough, and he can afford to paint you a first-class picture; and if you don't, he can't" (48).

He is an important figure in society and worthy of being the subject of a newspaper article, but only because he has money. We have seen how in the other works studied here how each author goes to great length to establish that his central character occupies a place in society that makes him worthy of being the central character in a tragedy. Here we see that Lapham is indeed an important figure in Boston in that the novel opens with Bartley Hubbard interviewing him for a Boston newspaper. We are shown immediately the nature of Lapham's importance when Hubbard tells him in jest that he is after "Your money or your life" (3) and Lapham responds "I guess you wouldn't want my life without the money" (3). Hubbard points out that Lapham is "just one million times more interesting to the public than if you hadn't a dollar" (3). His money is an integral part of how he views himself and there is immediate tension in the novel when he begins to have financial problems. One evening when the family is waiting for Lapham to get home from work his wife says "I don't know what to do with the man any more! Seems as if the more money he got, the more he wanted to get. It scares me to think what would happen to

him if he lost it" (131). This, of course, is the major question of the book and foreshadows the tragic ending: Can such a man who prides himself on his financial standing survive the loss of his money and the fall from the social position money gave him? Lapham is at first blind to this weakness in his nature and views himself as having the same control over his life as he does over the spirited horses he loves to drive. But life is more complex than driving a horse, as he is forced to realize.

During the interview, Hubbard goes on to make ironic remarks about how Lapham had grown up in poverty, learned the virtues of hard work and frugality, the "regulation thing" (8). Here, of course, Howells has one eye on the 'regulation thing' as it was being told in the sort of books made famous by Horatio Alger. It was part of the supporting myth of a runaway capitalism that the wealthy did not prosper because of their good luck or ruthless nature but because they had worked so hard and lived a moral life and their fortunes were only just rewards for their diligence. Hubbard writes that Lapham's parents had taught him "the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard's Almanac" (5). Benjamin Franklin's writings were also referred to by Max Weber as being central to the idea of the Protestant Ethic.

Hubbard even describes Lapham as "one of nature's noblemen" who "puts his heart and soul into [the paint]. He makes it a religion" (19). This is the first of many such references showing how business has absorbed his identity and made him an important figure in society, but at the same time caused him to lose sight of other things in his life.

With growing prosperity Lapham decides to build a new house, not only as a symbol of prestige but also to ease the entry of his daughters into society. He discusses this new house with the architect and says "I'm building a house to suit myself. And if money can do it, I guess I'm going to be suited" (48). This symbol of pride, which involves moving the family from an unfashionable to a fashionable part of Boston so the daughters can improve their chances of a good marriage, will ultimately be one link in a chain of setbacks that causes Lapham to fail.

After young Corey comes into the business, we are told that "Lapham had the pride of self-making, and he would not openly lower his crest to the young fellow he had taken into his business" (94). His decisions early in the novel seem to resonate with arrogance over his financial position and it is clear that he has been seduced by the wealth he has accumulated into viewing himself from an unrealistic point of view. The relationship between Lapham's position in society

and the money he has is made even more obvious when we learn that after Lapham gave money to his hometown for a new town-hall, "the first meeting they held in it they voted to change the name—Lumberville *wa'n't* a name,—and it's Lapham now" (14). Clearly, it would have taken a stronger moral nature than Lapham's to resist the temptation to see himself in exalted terms.

Lapham is confident and proud but from the opening scenes when we are shown the reporter's less than flattering and ironic estimation of him we see that his understanding of the place in society that money has brought him does not necessarily equal the way others look at him. The reporter judges him by different standards and does not accept Lapham's view of his own stature in the community. That Lapham's analysis of his social standing does not match what others think of him is repeated later by the younger Corey and his father who judge him with the standards of the Boston social elite. At one point, Mrs. Corey will think of him ironically as the "paint-king" (153). When his wife tells of meeting other people from Boston during their vacation, he asks what business the man was in. Hearing he was not in business but that his family had not been "stuck up" he replies: "They'd no need to—with you. I could buy him and sell him, twice over" (25). At a later point, his wife has doubts about whether the

family will be accepted into the social world they are trying to enter and even buys a book on etiquette for some guidance. When she expresses her fears to Lapham, he tells her "Look here, Persis! Once for all don't you ever let me hear you say anything like that again! I'm worth nigh onto a million, and I've made every cent of it myself" (136).

For the reader, the first hint of his coming fall may be the point at which he begins to realize that in spite of his money he is not the social equal of those in the society he is trying to gain entry to. He becomes painfully aware of his lack of social polish.

The time had been when Lapham could not have imagined any worldly splendor which his dollars could not buy if he chose to spend them for it; but his wife's half discoveries, taking form again in his ignorance of the world, filled him with helpless misgiving. A cloudy vision of something unpurchasable, where he had supposed there was nothing, had cowed him in spite of the burly resistance of his pride. (128)

He agonizes over what he should wear to a dinner being given by the Coreys and, later, after embarrassing himself by drinking too much wine and talking too much, he tells Corey "I was the only one that wasn't a gentleman there! . . . 'I disgraced you! I disgraced my family! I mortified your father before his friends!' His head dropped. 'I showed that I wasn't fit to go with you" (185). In apologizing and showing his humiliation, he loses even more of Corey's respect. Lapham is

a stranger in the Corey's social world and money is not enough to secure his standing.

As the novel progresses, his confidence in himself is slowly and tragically destroyed and each act of defiance seems only to hasten his fall. For example, after his troubles have become serious, Lapham goes out one evening to look over the unfinished new house. There, sitting alone before the fireplace, he feels a new but unrealistic strength and in what we will later see is one of his last acts of pride declares that he will survive his problems:

as Lapham glanced out of the torn linen sash he said to himself that that party, whoever he was, who had offered to buy his house might go to the devil: he would never sell it as long as he had a dollar. He said that he should pull through yet: and it suddenly came into his mind that, if he could raise the money to buy out those West Virginia fellows, he should be all right, and would have the whole game in his own hand. (274)

Of course, things do not go well and, in fact, after sitting in the new house for a while he goes off after grinding out the embers in the fireplace with his boot. He cannot so easily stamp out the embers anymore than he can the trouble he is in, and like his problems, the embers kept burning, the fire escaped the fireplace, and the house is destroyed.

But even the burning of the house is not enough to humble his overblown pride. Shortly thereafter there is talk of him

selling out his company and he fumes: "There ain't money enough in this country to buy out my paint" (278). He refuses to face the fact that he has lost the game. Later, when he is going bankrupt an analysis of his assets shows that he had never fully understood his finances and had overstated his wealth, just one more delusion that he had suffered from.

Again, as we have seen above, Howells sees tragedy as a slow eroding of personality and position, not as the result of a single, clear act. Reversal and recognition are there in the text but there is no clear and single moment when they become apparent. Lapham's pride leads him to make a series of mistakes over time, but it is not so easy to pin down the exact choice which led to his downfall. He and his wife seem to feel that his biggest mistake was forcing Rogers out of the company, but even in that there is some doubt as to whether that was a mistake.

During the course of his troubles, he finally comes to understand what started him on his way to a tragic fall. When discussing his forcing Rogers out of the firm, his wife tells him that "you had better face the truth Silas. . . You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! No, you had got greedy, Silas. **You had made your paint your god**, and you couldn't bear to let anybody else share in its blessings" (42, my emphasis again showing how his business had become so important in

Lapham's life). But Howells maintains a certain ambivalence in his moral judgments. His emphasis is on an individual life, not necessarily an attempt at some sweeping historical truth. Howells is reluctant to claim too much for what he presents except that in this case, in this situation, this individual did what he did and suffered for it. Of Lapham's choice to force out Rogers, the authorial comment is that although Lapham was somehow dependent on his partner's help and capital he may still have been justified in making the decision because there was some question as to whether Rogers was a good businessman.

Lapham had dealt fairly by his partner in money; he had let Rogers take more money out of the business than he put into it; he had, as he said, simply forced out of it a timid and inefficient participant in advantages which he had created. But Lapham had not created them all. He had been dependent at one time on his partner's capital. It was a moment of terrible trial. Happy is the man forever after who can choose the ideal, the unselfish part in such an exigency! Lapham could not rise to it. He did what he could maintain to be perfectly fair. The wrong, if any, seemed to be condoned to him, except when from time to time his wife brought it up. Then all the question stung and burned anew, and had to be reasoned out and put away once more. (44)

Again, we see the ambiguity of the moral choice. Lapham forced Rogers out for business reasons but there was also the element of individual passion for the enterprise. Lapham jealously reserved the right to oversee the company and wanted no interference. We can assume, perhaps, that he did not

realize at first that this was the way he felt but that with time, he could not allow anyone else to share in his creation. In making excuses for him, his wife "vaguely perceived that his paint was something more than business to him; it was a sentiment, almost a passion. He could not share its management and its profit with another without a measure of self-sacrifice" (44).

Obviously then, Lapham is a powerful, willful, and successful businessman, at the peak of his success when the novel begins. If we accept this work as a tragedy, then we can look for a fall from prosperity, a reversal of fortunes. As in all aspects of this novel, we do not have a specific turning point at which time we can say that Lapham has fallen from grace. He loses his great fortune but manages to pay all his bills and winds up back where he started with enough money to live as he did at first. At the end of the novel, however, Lapham himself looking back tells Rev. Sewell that

it seems to me I done wrong about Rogers in the first place; that the whole trouble came from that. It was just like starting a row of bricks. I tried to catch up, and stop 'em from going, but they all tumbled, one after another. It wa'n't in the nature of things that they could be stopped till the last brick went. (320)

But that is at the end of the novel and even Lapham himself has had to think about what happened. To get to that point he had committed a series of financial blunders, all

based on his need to rise socially and to make money. The house which he had spent so much money on and which was to mark his family's movement to a more fashionable part of the city burns down and he loses not only the money he had put into it but also what it could have gotten him if he had sold it. He even gets no insurance since he had let the policy lapse. He loans a considerable sum to Rogers, out of guilt over the past, and when he needs to get it back because of some losses in the stock market, Rogers does not have the money to repay him. Then, to compound things, the business is going down because the market is glutted and another company is proving to be a more successful competitor.

It is as though all the things he had believed in are shown to be true but that he is now on the losing side. He is offered a very seductive deal involving selling a mill he owns to a group of English investors which would save him financially. However, the mill actually has limited value because the railroad which services it has a monopoly and can be expected to charge an exorbitant fee for any hauling and make it impossible for the business to prosper. Lapham, although he may be a harsh competitor, is not dishonest. He refuses to sell and this act of simple honesty pushes him over the edge. However, this act also saves his soul and ironically makes his wife admire him even more.

Even though we do see the darker side of economic competition, I would not argue that the novel's events constitute a direct attack on capitalism as an economic system, but they do make up a serious questioning of certain aspects of the prevailing social Darwinist theories of rugged individualism and ruthless competition thought to be necessary for success. When Lapham discusses allowing his daughter Penelope to marry Corey instead of the other daughter Irene with whom everyone had thought Corey was in love, Rev. Sewell says "A time comes to every one of us when we can't help ourselves, and then we must get others to help us" (212). That is clearly one of the themes of the work, the need for a renewed sense of community. Lapham saw himself as a solitary battler, someone who had won his place in the world by individual effort. At the end, we see that everyone is part of a system, of a community. When Lapham decides not to be dishonest in order to save himself, he actually makes a decision to accept higher community standards of honesty.

This sense of community and compromise does become an aspect of Lapham's behavior in the novel. He promotes the marriage between Corey and Penelope and refuses to participate in the swindle of the English investors. He consults with all of his creditors honestly, even at one time telling a potential investor in his company that it was not as sound as

it appeared, and thereby losing the chance to sell. When he at last admits defeat, he says "I've got to the end of my string. To-morrow I shall call a meeting of my creditors, and put myself in their hands. If there's enough left to satisfy them, I'm satisfied" (307). He may have been socially unacceptable, he may have been occasionally unjust and rapacious in his financial dealings, but at the end "he had been no man's enemy but his own; every dollar, every cent had gone to pay his debts; he had come out with clean hands" (318). No longer the ruthless individualist he is willing to cooperate with everyone to keep his good name:

All those who were concerned in his affairs said he behaved well, and even more than well, when it came to the worst. The prudence, the good sense, which he had shown in the first years of his success, and of which his great prosperity seemed to have bereft him, came back; and these qualities, used in his own behalf, commended him as much to his creditors as the anxiety he showed that no one should suffer by him. (309)

And although he does not die at the end of this tragedy, he realizes fully that the life he had been so proud of is gone forever, that the situation he is in at the end of the novel "was as much the end of his proud, prosperous life as death itself could have been" (310).

Reverend Sewell clearly reflects some of Howells' thought when he is comforting Lapham and points out that making clear moral choices is not always easy. He says "We can trace the

operation of evil in the physical world. . . but I'm more and more puzzled about it in the moral world" (320). Although the authorial voice can say that

Adversity had so far been his friend that it had taken from him all hope of the social success for which people crawl and truckle, and restored him, through failure and doubt and heartache, the manhood which his prosperity had so nearly stolen from him" (315),

his life was a tragedy and the ending was sad, with Lapham back where his story began, a broken man with fading energy. Ironically, his financial fall has led to a moral rise, but he is broken nonetheless.

At the end, as in many tragedies, the central figure takes center stage and speaks the last words. Lapham's recognition of his mistakes is clear now but he reaffirms the moral choice he made that brought him down. Speaking to Sewell of his decisions that led to his fall, he says

all I know is that when it came to the point, although I could see that I'd got to go under unless I did it, that I couldn't sell out to those Englishmen, and I couldn't let that man put his money into my business without I told him just how things stood. . . About what I done? Well, it don't always seem as if I done it. . . Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it. . . I don't know as I should always say it paid; but if I done it, and the thing was to do over again, right in the same way, I guess I should have to do it. (320-321)

Lapham's decision is to live according to values which he took to be more important than the making of money. He says

that 'a hole opened for me' and he 'crept out'. That hole clearly gave him the chance to escape from Weber's 'iron cage.' Lapham was trapped in a sequence of events that even though they gave him the chance to continue making money, would have destroyed his sense of himself as a moral person. By renouncing the chance to save himself from financial ruin, he saved himself. In moral terms, the novel really is *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

#### End Notes

1. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1982.
2. *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. New York: The Modern Library, 2002.

## CHAPTER 4

### *MASTRO-DON GESUALDO*

#### I

#### Background

Giovanni Verga (1840-1922) was born in Catania, Sicily, and lived there until 1869. His father was a wealthy landowner who saw to it that his son received the best education available. After completing his basic schooling, Verga studied law for a short time at the University of Catania. However, he tired of his studies quickly and convinced his father to accept his decision to be a novelist and to subsidize publication of one of his first literary efforts with money destined for his last two years at the university. This novel, *I carbonari della montagna* (The Mountain Carbonari), published 1860-61, showed little originality and relied on the romantic novels he had read for its themes.

Verga wrote several "insipid historical novels" (Wilkins 452) in these early years but none of them were very historical, that is none of them really tried to make history an important part of the story, and none of them were very good. During this time, he and friends founded two political weeklies which quickly failed. One of them, *L'Italia contemporanea*, at least showed his interest in current

political and social issues. A novel, *Sulle Lagune* (On the Lagoon), was published in 1863 in installments in a Florentine newspaper and marked a change in his writing because, even if it told of a rather predictable romance between an Austrian soldier and a Venetian girl, it was based on observations of real people and not stereotypical situations taken from other novels he had read.

The success of this novel apparently motivated Verga to move to Florence in 1869 where he was thought to show promise. His novel *Una peccatrice* (A sinner) was published there and showed a tendency toward a fatalistic philosophy and an interest in how money affects individual lives. This was a significant change in his approach to fiction and showed signs of themes that were to be discussed in the great works that were to come later.

In 1872, he moved to Milan and published a number of novels in which love again played an inordinately important part, but by 1880 Verga had undergone a change in style and philosophy. From then on he was to be one of the main voices of *Verismo*, the Italian name for the literary movement that aimed to be true to life, rejecting the excesses of Romanticism. *Verismo* had both philosophical and literary meaning and was to guide Verga's work for the rest of his life. The movement, which encouraged the young writers in

Milan to try new avenues of expression, was shaped by the same intellectual forces that influenced many writers of the times, namely French naturalism, Comte's positivism, and Darwin's writings on evolution, especially in its sociological applications. The Italian *veristi* believed that their subjects should look to the provinces where human life had not been dulled by the effect of the city's corrupting influence.

Verga and other *verismo* writers were in the realist tradition and their works do show the influence of French naturalism. However, Verga's work is marked by a "heart-felt sentiment before the wearisome sadness of living as he sees it in simple souls bent beneath a religious sense of duty, honor, and labor" (Donadoni 496). For Verga, "while the artist, in theory, is to observe and not to judge, and is finally to disappear, [his] own stories are suffused with the underlying compassion he would not state" (Wilkins 452). Howells and Galdós are two other writers looked at in this study whose works show a personal interpretation of the ideas of Naturalism which allowed them more emotional involvement with the fate of their creations.

*I Malavoglia* (1881) and *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*, (1888), covering the historical periods 1864 to 1877 and 1820 to 1850 respectively, are the two masterpieces that came out of Verga's belief in this manner of writing. <sup>1</sup>

Verga's life was to span some of the most turbulent years in Italian history, which in the nineteenth century especially was marked by political instability, international intrigue, and repeated wars of independence. Italy was occupied by Napoleonic troops between 1796 and 1814, at which time the nation consisted of the Kingdoms of Sardinia and the Two Sicilies, the Papal States, and Tuscany. Austria controlled several smaller duchies in north central Italy, Lombardy, and Venetia.

The Italian unification movement known as the *Risorgimento* led to the revolution of 1848, and various other uprisings and wars of liberation and unification which at first were crushed by Austria. Eventually, Cavour and Garibaldi led wars which defeated the Austrians and unified Italy. In 1860, Garibaldi seized Sicily and the southern part of the Peninsula and in 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed under Victor Emmanuel. Only Venetia and Rome were not included in the new state (the former was added in 1866 and the latter in 1870).

However with independence came huge problems: a large debt, few natural resources, and almost no industry or transportation facilities, combined with extreme poverty, a high illiteracy rate, and an uneven tax structure. This is the background against which Verga was writing, but in his two

great works, there is only an occasional reminder of the nation's political instability. He stresses the isolation and traditional nature of each town but his books do contain various incidents that make it clear that there was political and cultural change in other parts of the country.

## II

### A Reading

It is helpful to look first at *I Malavoglia* (*The House by the Medlar Tree* in its English translation) to understand more clearly what Verga was exploring in *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*. *I Malavoglia* is the first in the five-novel series called *I Vinti* (The Doomed) in which he had planned to explore the human drive for material and financial wellbeing. *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* is the second in that series and the last to be published. Verga completed only a few chapters of a third volume, *La Duchessa di Leyra*, and nothing was done on the final two novels.

*I Malavoglia* tells how the members of the Malavoglia family, who had always lived by fishing, were ruined when their attempt to better their economic standing ended in disaster. The story, which takes place about ten miles north of Catania in the coastal village of Aci-Trezza, is put in motion when the youngest son 'Ntoni Malavoglia leaves the family home to complete his compulsory military service, a

clear indicator of how social forces at the national level reach even the smallest and most isolated village.

The loss of his labor and a drop in the demand for fish causes the grandfather Master 'Ntoni to look for an additional source of income. He makes a deal with the village usurer Uncle Crocifisso to buy a load of lupins, a kind of seed normally used as animal fodder but sometimes eaten by poor people, and then carry them in his boat, ironically called the *Provvidenza*, to Riposto where they can be resold for a profit.

The usurer follows tradition and loans the money solely on Master 'Ntoni's good name and with no signed contract. However, he will later call on the power of the formal legal system to get his money back. Master 'Ntoni simply meant to improve the family's financial status but he violated his own beliefs when he went against village tradition and took up a new occupation. The old man was given to expressing popular wisdom in the form of proverbs which often stressed the need for conformity. He would say: "Gli uomini son fatti come le dita della mano: il dito grosso deve far da dito grosso, e il dito piccolo deve far da dito piccolo" (112) ["Men are made like the fingers of a hand: the thumb must act like a thumb, and the little finger must act like a little finger" (7)], "Fa il mestiere che sai, che se non arricchisci camperai" ["Stick to your trade, you may not get rich but you'll earn your

bread"], and "Contentati di quel che t'ha fatto tuo padre; se non altro non sarai un birbante" (113). ["Be satisfied to be what your father made you, if nothing else you won't be a rascal" (8)]<sup>2</sup> By violating traditional wisdom and his own beliefs, he destroys his family simply by deciding to try to profit from a commercial venture instead of sticking to fishing.

His eldest son takes the boat out to deliver the lupins and is lost at sea in a storm. "The lupine transaction puts the novel in motion. In it we must recognize the hand of destiny, very much in the same way as in the key incidents lying at the foundations of Greek tragedies" (Cecchetti, *Verga* 77-78). By this one false step, done with all the good intentions possible, the father of the family brings about its ruin. Uncle Crocifisso is a scoundrel and everyone knows it, but in a society where everyone must fight to survive, money is power and he has money and no one is willing to go against him. He sits outside and watches events in the village and is always ready to make a profit from what he sees. He steadily brings more and more pressure against the Malavoglia family to have the loan repaid.

The old man feels he must be true to his word and pay back the usurer, even though everyone in the village knows the lupins were spoiled and virtually worthless. His morality is

traditional and having given his word he cannot fail to make good on the debt. Ultimately, the family must give up their home to repay the loan even though there was no legal requirement to do so; the house is actually in the daughter-in-law's name and the usurer has no claim on it. The traditional morality of Master 'Ntoni leads to failure in the new society where economic relations have become formal, uncaring, and dominant. Within the village we can see the competing ideologies clearly, the traditional and personal values of the earlier way of life in the village and the Malavoglia family against the indifferent and calculating coldness of the wider marketplace which is beginning to affect life in the village.

Following the initial error of judgment, the violation of tradition, Master 'Ntoni's mistake dooms everyone. Because the financial loss reduced the family to a state of near poverty, the grandson becomes involved in smuggling to make money and drifts away from the traditional values of his father. Eventually, he goes to jail and then must leave the village to seek his fortune in other lands. During an outbreak of cholera, the oldest son's widow Maruzza goes about the countryside to sell eggs and bread to those who have fled the village. However, she becomes sick herself and dies. She also left the traditional path, took up a new business, and died

because of it. The granddaughters' lives are also ruined as the result of a string of circumstances that began with the original transaction. One's honor was compromised when the local customs officer came to her house late at night to warn her that her brother's smuggling was going to get him in trouble. She leaves the village and the secure circle of friends and family where she is known because her reputation was ruined. Out of the village, almost without an identity, she has no way to earn a living and ultimately becomes a prostitute. The other sister, in turn, could not marry the man she had loved for years because her sister's lost honor had cast a shadow over the family. The power of traditional culture to control the lives of the family members is clear. They wanted to change, but real change was not possible.

The old man 'Ntoni Malavoglia is the central figure in this novel but the tragedy actually involves everyone in the family and some would argue everyone in the village. The old man, the family, the village are all 'ideal types' in Verga's study. Woolf points out that

Instead of simply presenting his theme against the background of a village, [Verga] has conceived the entire tale as a village story, that is, as a story so deeply rooted in its village setting that its every part, characterization, action, presentation, motivation, springs from the setting and is qualified by it. (54-55)

Compared to *Mastro-don Gesualdo*, the tragedy in *I Malavoglia* does not have the clear structure that I am trying to show was to become a characteristic of the 'tragedy' of the financial ruin of a businessman or other bourgeois figure in the nineteenth-century novel. The village values and the forces that govern individual conduct are still tied strongly to traditional society and have not been changed so severely by the larger economic forces throughout the nation. The old man makes a terrible mistake but he and his family are destroyed by bad luck and changing social conditions which he does not fully understand and cannot adapt to. There are many threads and many lives in this novel and many of them end tragically.

'Ntoni Malavoglia destroys his family inadvertently because of a desire to improve everyone's financial situation and the need to follow through on his word. His tragedy does come from within his very being, but the lines are not so clear cut. The novel ends in great sadness but there is no clear recognition by any of the characters as to one mistake or act that has ruined their lives. The reader can see what has happened but the characters do not come to a moment of recognition. They are not passive victims, but they are victims who do not really know why they have had their lives ruined. This, of course, is not necessary for a work to be a

tragedy but I want to point out an essential characteristic of this tragic novel.

Most of the characters in *I Malavoglia* are so immersed in the traditional society that they cannot truly see that they have made mistakes. They do not see the contradiction in what they believed and what happened. They violated the traditions of each man sticking to his trade, but do not see how that act compromised their existence. They do not see that they were caught between two ways of life.

We clearly have a family, a village, a historical time, all coming together to generate a tragedy, but the vision of the tragic, the aesthetic form of the tragedy is not so clear, nor is it meant to be. Verga is not stressing here how wider social and economic forces have destroyed human relationships in a wider social context; these characters are not alienated from each other in the way in which characters in *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* are. The Malavoglia are still a close family, but in a village that is being touched by social and economic change, they are destroyed together when they make mistakes within that setting.

However, when we consider *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* we see that it is a tragedy in the strictest formal and thematic sense of the word. Gesualdo's story is elevated to 'tragedy' as a literary art form because it contains the significant and

emotional struggle and defeat of a basically good person who finds himself unable to meet the challenges presented by rapid social change and the contradictions that exist in his way of life. He dedicates his life to a blind pursuit of money, and does not see what it is doing to him and to those who are close to him. He does not see that the world has changed and that the aristocracy, for whom he has so much respect, are losing their high position, and he is blinded by the desire to have his daughter marry a nobleman. The novel can be described as having the form of tragedy as discussed by Aristotle, only in this case we are given the story of the rise and fall of "a self-made man who marries a noblewoman and ends in inertia and discouragement a life that had begun with the desperate will to succeed" (Procacci 290).

*Mastro-Don Gesualdo* is written in an objective, sometimes cryptic, style that forces the reader to follow Gesualdo closely as he rises and falls, a victim of his own miscalculations. Verga's naturalism did call for an objective scientific approach to fiction and he tried to write in such a way that the author was not visible. He at one time said he had realized how he wanted to write when he saw the log book of a ship's captain which included only the most important events of the day in an abbreviated, emotionless language. The unity of the novel comes from this style and how we are led to

follow Gesualdo's movements so closely. Gesualdo's "rugged figure dominates the novel, which finds its unity not in the unfolding of a continuous plot but in the successive impacts of his will upon the life around him and of circumstances upon his will" (Wilkins 456). The novel stays close to Gesualdo but when the characters refer to rising and falling prices, to the political happenings far away in Palermo, to the menace of the peasant demonstrations and threats in the town, which are described but which happen offstage, we see clearly that this novel has a definite historical and economic context. Written with the purpose of presenting characters living in a specific time in Italian history, the novel

is a powerful presentation of a world which was rapidly disappearing; it had indeed more vitality in the author's memory than in contemporary society, for it is the Sicily of Verga's youth. Thus it has a historical value which cannot be disregarded.  
(Bergin 83)

Verga took the readers' knowledge of contemporary events for granted, as he should have when thinking of the reader he was writing for, and did not digress into lengthy explanations of social or political events which would have taken us outside of the narrow space around Gesualdo. Gesualdo accepts the value system of his world, a system in which "money and property constitute the only true duties" (Cechetti, *Verga* 132), and succeeds to a very great extent within that system.

He lives at a time when fortunes can be built by individual effort and hard dealing. His path opens up before him as he works, haggles, and saves, but at the end of that very path is a tragic and seemingly unavoidable death. He has done what would have been expected of him as a successful businessman in an unstable and demanding capitalist environment, but to fulfill those expectations caused him to live in a way that made his tragic death inevitable. In the world of the novel, he is the 'ideal type' of the commoner upstart who is using the emerging capitalist system to challenge the established order.

The story begins early one morning with the noise and excitement caused by a fire in the ancient palace of the Traos. This family, which now consists only of Don Diego, his brother Don Fernando, and their sister Bianca, is the most aristocratic of the town but also one of the poorest. Mastro-Don Gesualdo's house is next door and is threatened so he naturally takes the lead in trying to put the fire out.

The blaze is ultimately extinguished, but during the confusion, Don Diego goes into his sister's bedroom and discovers their cousin Nini Rubiera with whom the sister has obviously been having an affair. After being found out, she becomes hysterical, has convulsions, and a doctor is called. He examines her and finds that she is pregnant. Don Diego

realizes that he must quickly arrange a marriage for his sister but Nini's mother, the wealthy Baroness Rubiera, refuses because Bianca is poor.

The ruined aristocrats in their crumbling mansion show us that their time has past even though many are still struggling fiercely to survive and maintain their place in the world. During the fire, Diego runs around terrified that some ancient documents relating to a lawsuit which will restore their wealth may be lost. It is clear that the lawsuit is a delusion and that there will be no bright future for the Traos. The brother will eventually be convinced that his sister should marry Gesualdo but only after it is shown to be a good chance for her and the family to recover some of their lost prestige.

In *Mastro-Don Gesualdo*, if the aristocrats are falling in the economic scale of things, Gesualdo is an example of someone who is rising. Evidence of how hard he works and how well he handles his money are scattered throughout the book. He began in a humble position, took risks, saved his money, and succeeded. The major source of his wealth is land which he either rents or farms to sell the crops he can grow and various building projects, some of which he undertakes for the government. His actions are shaped by the opportunities given him by the economic system and his personal ambitions.

Cechetti described the novel as

the epic of the economic compulsion that relentlessly drives a man toward the acquisition of great wealth and the power that such wealth generates. Throughout his previous works Verga had consistently stressed the importance of financial well-being and how its presence, or its absence, conditions all other aspects of human existence and of human relations. (Introduction, *Gesualdo* x)

As we see with most tragic figures in literature, Gesualdo suffers because by acting as he had to act, because of who he was, he was fated to fall and die. There is tragic destiny here, not because the gods are unkind but rather because within this specific historic moment and given his character, he had to act as he did. To succeed within the world in which he found himself, Gesualdo had to have certain goals and work to achieve them.

We are told over and over that Gesualdo had a way of making money and making good deals. For example, two of the novel's characters are bargaining over the price of wheat and one of them says "State tranquillo, che mastro-don Gesualdo fa tutti i mestieri in cui c'è da guadagnare" (18). ["Don't worry, everything is Mastro-don Gesualdo's business if he can make a profit" (15).] One of the arguments used to try to convince Donna Bianca to marry Gesualdo is that he will "si farà ricco come Creso, con quella testa fine che ha!" (96). ["get as rich as Croesus, with that sharp head for business he's got!" (87).] He is described at length thusly:

-Sapete quanto ha guadagnato nella fabbrica del mulini mastro-don Gesualdo? - entrò a dire il notaro a mezza voce in aria de mistero. - Una bella somma! Ve lo dico io!... Si è tirato su dal nulla... Me lo ricordo io manovale, coi sassi in spalla... sissignore!... Mastro Nunzio, suo padre, non aveva di che pagare le stoppie per far cuocere il gesto nella sua fornace...Ora ha l'impresa del ponte a Fiumegrande!...Suo figlio ha sborsato la cauzione, tutta in pezzi da dodici tarì l'un sull'altro. Ha le mani in pasta in tuttì gli affari del commune... Dicono che vuol mettersi anche a speculare sulle terre... L'appetito viene mangiando... Ha un bell'appetito... e dei buoni denti, ve lo dico io!... Se lo lasciano fare, di qui a un po' si dirà che mastro-don Gesualdo è il padrone del paese! (37-38)

Note: Verga's ellipses are stylistic and are given as in his novel; My ellipses in quotes from the novel are placed in brackets)

["Do you know how much Mastro-Don Gesualdo made building the mills?" the Notary cut in with a quiet voice and an air of mystery. "Quite a sum! I'm telling you!... He pulled himself up from nothing... I can remember when he was a mason's helper, carrying rocks on his shoulders... yes sir!... Mastro Nunzio, his father, couldn't pay for the stubble to burn the gypsum in his kiln... -Now he's got the contract for the bridge at Fiumegrande!... His son has shelled out the warranty money, all twelve-tari pieces, one on top of the other... He's got his fingers in all of the town's affairs... They say that he's planning to speculate on land to... The more you eat the hungrier you get... He's quite hungry and he's got good teeth, too, I'm telling you!... If they let him keep on doing what he wants, in a while they'll say he owns the town!" (33)]

When the Sacristan is trying to convince Donna Bianca to marry Gesualdo, he describes him in terms that certainly make it appear that Verga was alluding to the classic tragic theme

that when pride becomes too great and man seeks to rival the gods, a fall is inevitable:

Le terre della Contea se le piglierà tutte lui, don Gesualdo!... e poi le mani in pasta da per tutto. Non si mura un sasso che non ci abbia il suo guadagno lui... Domeneddio in terra! Ponti, mulini, fabbriche, strade carreggiabili!... il mondo sottosopra mette quel diavolo! Fra poco si andrà in carrozza sino a Militello, **prima Dio e don Gesualdo Motta!**... Sua moglie andrà in carrozza dalla mattina alla sera!... camminerà sull'oro colato, como è vero Dio! (97-98, my emphasis)

[He will pick up all those County lands, he, Don Gesualdo!... And then, he has his fingers in every pie. Not a stone is put into a wall without him making a profit... Like God himself on earth! Bridges, mills, factories, paved roads!... He turns the world upside down, that demon! Soon we'll go all the way to Militello by coach - **thanks to God and to Don Gesualdo Motta!**... His wife will wallow in luxury!... She'll walk on fine gold, I swear to God! (88, my emphasis)]

Verga clearly establishes Gesualdo in the tradition of many nineteenth century tragic novels in that he is an impressive figure and does represent a sort of nobility in the rising financial class that was taking power as the aristocracy declined. One of the characters says of him "Il nascer grandi è caso, e non virtù! . . . Venire su dal nulla, qui sta il vero merito!" (44). ["High birth is an accident, not a virtue! . . . To rise up from nothing, that's the real merit!" (39).] But, as we saw with Goriot and Lapham, to raise oneself up from a lower position does not always mean that one will be accepted by those who form a social elite. However,

even if someone who has pulled himself up from the lower classes may be looked down upon by the aristocracy, we see that a class structure is a complex entity in that respect and admiration work in multiple directions. For those in the lower orders, Gesualdo is a man to be admired.

Once Gesualdo's prominence has been established then there is the possibility of a tragic fall. As the reader follows Gesualdo's trajectory there are many signs indicating what will happen to him. We have obvious evidence as to what his tragic error is, and that is his seeing all human relations in terms of deals or financial transactions, the commodification of human relations. For example, Gesualdo is a bachelor and because of his wealth is a very attractive match. One of the town officials, acting as a go-between, suggests that he should marry Donna Bianca because her noble connections would improve his business prospects. Gesualdo is attracted by the idea and never even thinks of marrying Diodata, a poor girl who loves him and has apparently had two sons by him out of wedlock. He recognizes her loyalty and what she has done for him. He tells her "Sei una buona ragazza!... buona e fedele! vigilante sugli interessi del padrone, sei stata sempre". . ./Il padrone mi ha dato il pane, -rispose essa semplicemente.- Sarei una birbona. . ." (72). ["'You are a good girl! . . . good and faithful. Keeping an eye on your

boss's interests, you've always been. . .''the boss has given me bread,' she answered simply. 'I would be a wicked...'" (65).]

She is perhaps the one person in his life who does not view each contact with him in terms of personal advantage and he cannot see her virtues. Of course, it is understandable that the two perhaps cannot marry within the social context of the novel, but I think it is more correct to say that Gesualdo's ambitions and greed will simply not allow him to marry someone from a lower economic class who cannot bring him any advantage. Any marriage must be part of a good deal which will advance his social and financial standing. The irony here is that the 'deal' that seems so promising turns out to be bad. Bianca presents him with a daughter, who is not his, and Diodata apparently could have given him the family life and the strong children he would have liked to have.

He will marry Donna Bianca, because of the advantages her noble family name will supposedly bring him in business and his wish to move up in society. We see the nature of Gesualdo's thinking when he must be convinced of the advantages of marrying her since she will not bring him a dowry. The canon-priest tells him he should marry Donna Bianca because she is

-Una perla! una ragazza che non sa altro: casa e chiesa!... Economa... non vi costerà nulla... In casa non è avvezza a spender di certo!... Ma di buona famiglia!... Vi porterebbe il lustro in casa!... V'imparentate con tutta la nobiltà... L'avete visto, eh stasera?... che festa v'hanno fatto?... I vostri affari andrebbero a gonfie vele. (55)

["A jewel! A girl who doesn't know anything but home and church!... Frugal?'... She won't cost you anything.... At home she is not used to spending for sure!... But of good family!... She'll bring prestige into your house. You'll become a relative of the entire aristocracy...Did you see tonight?... What kind of welcome they gave you?... Your affairs would go full blast" (50).]

The marriage is again pushed as a good investment when the canon-priest says

Gli affari vostri fanno a pugni con gli affari degli altri [...] Apposta bisogna tirarli dalla vostra... Fra di loro si danno la mano... son tutti parenti... Voi siete l'estraneo... siete il nemico [...] quando sarete entrato nel campo anche voi... Quella è la dote che vi porterebbe donna Bianca!... È denaro sonante per voi che avete le mani in tanti affari. (89)

["Your business clashes with everybody else's business [...] That's why we must draw them to your side.... Among themselves they're hand in glove with one another.... They're all relatives.... You're the stranger... you're the enemy. [...] When you've come into their camp.... That's the dowry Donna Bianca would bring you!... It's good money for a man like you, who has so many business deals on his hands". (81)]

And of course Gesualdo is only being consistent when he thinks marrying her will indeed bring him advantages. He has money, but in each deal involving the town, he has to fight

against established tradition, and that usually means city contracts and leases had before been given out according to influence rather than by actual competitive bidding. When Gesualdo actually decides to bid for city leases, and wins, he is looked down on for having violated custom. We can see his true feelings when the marriage negotiations have stalled. There is some question about her accepting and the sacristan continues to talk of the need to enlist the aid of other parties to help convince Donna Bianca to marry him. He had thought the marriage was settled and asks "Se a lei l'affare gli va, allora che bisogno c'è di tante chiacchiere" (102). ["If it's true that she likes the deal, why all these schemes?" (92).] The choice of words is significant. The marriage is an 'affaire,' a 'deal,' and only secondarily involves emotions. We see later that he did apparently harbor some feelings for her that at least led him to want a normal married life but that the primary motivation before the marriage was economic.

Gesualdo repeatedly indicates that human relations are shaped by economic interests. Like Vautrin and Goriot, Gesualdo repeats his belief that self-interest and money are central to life almost like a mantra. For example, he repeats the phrase "Ciascuno fa il suo interesse" (147 and 221). ["Everyone looks after his own interest" (134 and 204).] He

views his marriage at first as a straightforward business deal that will bring benefit to both parties and with such a beginning, it is not surprising that his marriage turns out to be an emotional failure. Bianca does not bring him an improved financial situation and she remains cold and distant in the marriage. It appears that she very quickly declares herself to be too unwell for normal marital relations.

And, of course, Gesualdo is not alone in allowing money to become such an important factor in human relations. When Bianca's brother dies and the funeral is being planned, Don Luca says that he has taken care of everything: "Il catafalco, le bandiere, tante messe quanti preti ci sono. Ma chi paga?" (175). ["The catafalque, the banners, as many masses as there are priests. But who's going to pay?" (161).] The novel is filled with negotiations, however small, about the price per basket of wheat, or larger sums concerning the rental of public lands, or the daughter's dowry. Friendship, marriage, food, seemingly every aspect of life is touched by the money economy. When Bianca's brother Diego is laying on his deathbed, the talk is of money. "Ci vogliono denari- [Mendola] cisse piano tornando indietro. - Avete sentito il sagrestano? Le spese chi le fa?" (176). ["We'll need money," [Baron Mendola] said in a low voice as he came back in. "Did you hear the sacristan? Who's going to cover the cost?" (162).]

Much of the novel's tension and Don Gesualdo's suffering is caused by the fact that he "seems quite unable to calculate the effect of his actions upon the people among whom he lives, or, conversely, to understand that the motivation that influences other people's behavior is not necessarily the same as his own" (Woolf 95). Cecchetti says "being unceasingly driven by economic motivations, he can only speak in the language of business. In his mind there is no conflict between monetary interests and human feelings" (Twayne 138). Gesualdo cannot understand the feelings or motives of his wife or daughter, of his own family, of the peasants who rise up and threaten him, or often even his business rivals:

Two features, don Gesualdo's sympathetic character and his blindness, make him almost a tragic hero in the classical mould, one for whom we can easily feel pity. But don Gesualdo is a modern version of the tragic hero—he is a man who rose by his own efforts, which in our eyes makes his fall even more pitiful than if he had been born to high estate, as in the Aristotelian formula. (Woolf 95)

Cecchetti says "the isolation born of greed, of ambition, and of the consequent impossibility to understand one another is the tragic theme of the novel" (Introduction, *Gesualdo* xiv). Unfortunately, Gesualdo's way of thinking and acting did not allow him at the end to actually do and understand the things that would have made him happy. He paid no attention to the real feelings of those around him. He could not see or

understand the feelings of his daughter, his family, or the poor girl who loved him clearly. He had certain material goals and focused his entire being on them but when he had accomplished everything he had wanted to, he found that the wealth and power had no meaning for him without the people he had allowed to drift away.

Gesualdo's recognition of his tragic error seems to overwhelm him at the end when he is very ill and the local doctor talks about spending money for further medical consultations.

-I denari!... Vi stanno a tutti sugli occhi i denari che ho guadagnato... A che mi servono... se non posso comprare neanche la salute?... Tanti bocconi amari m'hanno dato. . . sempre! (333)

["Money!... Not one of you can take his eyes off the money I've earned!... What good is it to me. . . if I can't even buy health with it? . . . It has only made my mouth bitter . . . always!" (307).]

He goes to the country for one last look at his property hoping that this would raise his spirits:

Ma laggiù, dinanzi alla sua roba, si persuase che era finite davvero, che ogni speranza per lui era perduta, al vedere che di nulla gliene importava, oramai. La vigna metteva giù le foglie, i seminati erano alti, gli ulivi in fiore, i sommacchi verdi, e su ogni cosa stendevasi una nebbia, una tristezza, un velo nero. [. . .] Il mondo andava ancora pel suo verso, mentre non c'era piu speranza per lui, roso del baco al pari de una mela fradicia che deve cascare del ramo, senz forza de muovere un passo sulla sua terra, senza voglia de mandar giù uovo. Allora disperato de dover morire, si mise a bastonare anatre e tacchini, a strappar gemme e

sementi. Avrebbe voluto distruggere d'un colpo tutto quel ben di Dio che aveva accumulato a poco a poco. Voleva che la sua roba se ne andasse con lui, disperata come lui. (337)

[But down there before his property, he indeed realized that it was all over, that all hope was lost for him, when he saw that now he didn't care at all. The vines were already leafing, the wheat was tall, the olive trees in bloom, the sumacs green, and over everything there spread a mist, a sadness, a black veil. [. . .] The world was still going its way, while for him there was no hope any more, gnawed inside by a worm just like a rotten apple that must fall from the tree—without the strength to take a step on his own land, without feeling like swallowing an egg. Then desperate that he had to die, he began to hit ducks and turkeys with his stick to break out the buds and the wheat stocks. He'd have liked to destroy in a single blow all the wealth he had put together little by little. He wanted his property to go with him. (311)]

His drive for money and power can be seen in Darwinian terms. Gesualdo was an economic predator and he wanted to use his money to rise in society, to have more power in town politics, and to push his child on to a higher social level. Unfortunately, he could not understand the motivations of others and could not see that his drive to make money was leading him down a path where at the end he would die alone and neglected. His failure to recognize that in making money he was neglecting the human relationships that were important to him represent a clear insight into his tragic error and final recognition, but there is another side to his tragedy,

one that he may have also come to realize but that we as readers most certainly can see clearly.

Gesualdo has made money but seems not to profit from it. He remains static in the novel, living in the same place until the end when he travels to Palermo to die in his daughter's house. He seems not to take any pleasure from the things around him except to the extent that they are his possessions or that they give him further opportunities to become richer. Money is important as a source of power to dominate others, to work one's will, and not for the greater pleasure and fullness of life. We have seen in *Père Goriot* the tragic archetypal scene of the death of the abandoned father, but Goriot at least had Rastignac near him when he died. Gesualdo must die alone and even the servant who was to watch over him is indifferent to his death.

Gesualdo fails in a fundamental aspect of a money society; he makes flawed decisions concerning the exchange value of his transactions. He fails tragically in that he never seems to get his money's worth. He marries but gets little in return for what he gives up. His wife's relatives are no help in his financial dealings and he must continue to fight on his own for everything. Even the daughter, for whom he had such great ambitions, is not really his own.

His relationship with other members of his family is also unsatisfactory in terms of the exchanges made. Gesualdo has helped his family regularly by giving them money but they are never satisfied with what he has done for them. After the father's death, his sister attacks him viciously because she feels that his wealth was built with their father's capital and should therefore be shared with everyone in the family. His father was more of a burden than an inspiration in earning his fortune, but Gesualdo was unable to interpret this human situation and to understand the feelings of his family. We see clearly that he has supported the family but doesn't get the respect or gratitude one would expect from such a situation.

His relationship with his daughter is also a failure because in "his blind fondness for her he fails to see that everything he does for her does but estrange her the more [and] increases the tragedy of his life" (Bergin 80-81). He refuses to let his daughter marry whom she wants to marry and instead forces her to accept another member of the ruined nobility, providing her with an excellent dowry. Seemingly, the only reason he did not want her to marry her first love was that the youth was poor and he did not want to be taken advantage of. The idea of there being a sort of love which is not based on calculation seems to be something he cannot understand. Marriage negotiations involving daughters in the

nineteenth century were complex affairs for moneyed classes, as we see in other novels studied here, and were meant to gain advantages for both sides. Gesualdo gets nothing for the money he gives for his daughter's dowry except more financial troubles. The new husband has a title but is virtually bankrupt because of his willful spending, and continues to get money out of his father-in-law to meet his debts.

In the end when Gesualdo dies, all of his property will be left to his daughter as his only heir. Ironically, as pointed out above, his wife's cousin is the true father of his daughter, and Gesualdo will have been defeated completely by the very aristocratic social structure he had been competing against most of his life. The sons he had with Diodata have disappeared from his life and the only memories he would have of them as he dies are that they were among those who were pressuring him for money.

Even at the end, his language takes the form of a business discussion. He tells his daughter "-Ora fammi chiamare un prete, -terminò con un altro tono di voce. -Voglio fari i miei conti con Domeneddio" (354. ["'Now, send for a priest,' he concluded in a different tone of voice, 'I want to settle my accounts with God'" (327).] A good businessman to the end, his language indicates that he sees even his

relationship with God as a business transaction and he must settle accounts at the end of the contract.

End Notes

1. Although Verga is not as well known as he should be, it is interesting to note that William Dean Howells wrote the introduction to a translation of *I Malavoglia* in 1890 and that D.H. Lawrence translated *Mastro-don Gesualdo*.
2. English citations are from Raymond Rosenthal's translation of *I Malavoglia*, in English, *The House by the Medlar Tree*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1983) and Giovanni Cecchetti's translation of *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

## CHAPTER 5

### MIAU

#### I

#### Background

Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) was born in Las Palmas in the Canary Islands. His mother was a Basque and she was said to be a major influence in his life, at least as far as his strength of character and seriousness of purpose. She was a religiously conservative and intolerant woman and although Galdós did not agree with her religious ideas, he was to exhibit an interest in the spiritual aspect of human life until his death.

In 1862 he went to study law at the University of Madrid but by 1865 was working as a journalist. During the first four years with *La Nación* he published hundreds of articles on a variety of subjects. His first published novel, *La Fontana de Oro*, [*The Golden Fountain*], appeared in 1868.

Galdós always had a serious interest in the history of Spain which he saw as undergoing a slow but necessary movement toward a better society and wrote his *Episodios Nacionales* [*National Episodes*] to show the nation's progress. Although the *National Episodes* were meant to convey the history of Spain, Rafael Bosch points out that

la verdadera novela histórica de Galdós está. . . en las novelas plenamente realistas, en que ambiente social y personajes individuales son estudiadas en su evolución histórica, así como en su proceso de interacción. (83)

[the true historical novel of Galdós is. . . in the fully realistic novels in which the social environment and individual characters are studied in their historical evolution, just as in their process of interaction.]

In this wish to chronicle the social history of his time, Galdós was obviously influenced by such writers as Dickens and Balzac and can be seen early in his career as being theoretically committed to the new ideas of realism. He also followed Balzac in the use of recurring characters to link his novels with one another to emphasize the connectedness of all aspects of Spanish culture.

Galdós was later influenced both by Zola and Tolstoy. Although he accepted the naturalist philosophy that a novel should be an objective study of society with an emphasis on the impact of heredity and environment on each character's life, he came more and more to view the expression of spirit as a powerful element in life.

Galdós read Tolstoy sometime around 1885 and, as with Howells, the great Russian author helped bring about changes in the way Galdós wrote. He began to show even more interest in presenting how spirit works through the lives of his human characters and to drift further from any purely materialist

explanation of human conduct. Galdós's later version of Zola's approach to fiction has been dubbed 'spiritual naturalism'.

Galdós also felt it part of his role as an author to take part in the effort to correct social abuses and problems. The occasional bitterness in his later novels could easily result from the difficulties of seeing and writing about spirit in a society obsessed with material goods. Galdós also found himself in a political situation of which Pierre Vilar has written that, according to one's point of view, "the political history of nineteenth-century Spain is either picaresque or irksome, a mere sequence of plots, both comic and tragic" (58). The irony, anger, and harshness often seen in Galdós's novels can be seen as a reflection of this often incomprehensible situation. Hopes of a better society were routinely crushed by numerous revolts, changes of administration, and economic fluctuations.

The Napoleonic invasion brought, at first, hope of new freedoms but in reality only political chaos as Spain could find no unity during the occupation or after the foreign troops retreated. The country was not only having problems internally but also trying to retain its American colonies which were fighting for independence. The period before the Restoration in 1875 was marked by a series of civil wars, either local or on a wider scale, and constant political

infighting. After the restoration of Alonso XII, political power was shared uneasily and alternately in normally fraudulent elections by the liberal and conservative parties. The corrosive force of money in such an environment in the form of common political corruption and petty materialism is one of Galdós's major themes.

## II

### A Reading

Galdós chronicled the social and economic changes in Spain during the nineteenth century and was an accurate and often bitter critic of what he saw. He linked money and tragedy in many of his novels, but often in an ironic manner meant to frustrate any simplistic response by the reader. Before looking at *Miau* (1888), which does have the formal structure of tragedy I have tried to delineate here as a convention, I believe it is useful to look briefly at *Torquemada en la hoguera* [*Torquemada at the Stake* (1889)] as an ironic anti-tragedy written just one year after *Miau*, the work I am presenting as a true tragedy. The form is what we see in the other novels studied here, and the novel proceeds by way of a sequence of standard scenes which would be expected if such a novel were going to show a character disillusioned with his quest for wealth, but there is a surprise for the reader at the end. *Torquemada* shows Galdós's

evolving vision of what *not* to expect from the crass materialism he saw around him.

The novel opens with a discussion of Torquemada as a heartless moneylender interested only in profits. That the usurer has the same name as the Grand Inquisitor is obviously a deliberate and thematic choice. As the Grand Inquisitor put people on the stake for religious reasons, the moneylender puts them on the stake for not paying their debts. He is shown as "el ejemplo culminante del mal gusto y de la desolación espiritual" (Earle 29). ["the perfect example of bad taste and spiritual desolation".] Even though the tone is ironic and often humorous, these opening remarks begin preparing the reader to expect a conventional denouement satisfying the wish to see the usurer repent for his harsh treatment of those who owe him money. We are prepared for the conventional reformed sinner, one who exhibits all the negative traits during his dealings with others, but then at the end has a change of heart and vows to lead a better life.

As the novel opens, Francisco Torquemada is compared to the leader of the inquisition who "tantas vidas infelices consumió en llamas" (7). ["consumed in flames so many unhappy lives".]<sup>1</sup> He is the heartless capitalist, the calculator of profit and loss, and becomes the literary 'ideal type' of the heartless moneylender who allows Galdós to analyze how money

has penetrated and corrupted all of society. The novel has a list of those who come to the usurer for help that gives us a stark image of how money is the blood of society:

Es Torquemada el habilitado de aquel infierno en que fenecen desnudos y fritos los deudores; hombres de más necesidades que posibles, empleados con más hijos que sueldo; otros ávidos de la nómina tras larga cesantía; militares trasladados de residencia, con familión y suegra por añadidura; personajes de flaco espíritu, poseedores de un buen destino, pero con la carcoma de una mujercita que da té y empeña el verbo para comprar las pastas; viudas lloronas que cobran el Montepío civil or military y se ven en mil apuros; **sujetos diversos que no aciertan a resolver el problema aritmético en que se funda la existencia social**, y otros muy perdidos, muy faltones, muy destornilados de cabeza o rasos de moral tramposos y embusteros.(8, my emphasis. Note the reference to rational accounting which Weber saw as a defining characteristic of capitalism.)

[Torquemada is the rent collector of that hell where debtors wind up naked and fried; men with more necessities than possibilities; workers with more children than salary; others anxious for a government job after a long layoff; transferred army officers with large families and with mothers-in-law thrown in; weak-willed people with a good job but with the burden of a little woman who has teas and buys pastries on credit; tearful widows who have a little pension from the civil or military cooperative but find themselves in financial problems; **diverse people who can't manage to solve the numerical problem on which is founded all social existence**, and other lost souls, bankrupts, who are either a little nuts, or have no morals, tricksters and charlatans]. (my emphasis. Note the reference to rational accounting which Weber saw as a defining characteristic of capitalism.)]

Clearly, for those who live in such a society, the calculation of profit and loss is necessary not only in

business but in everyday life, and Torquemada takes advantage of all of those who cannot handle the accounting. In spite of his harsh way of dealing with people, Torquemada was not a miser of the classical sort who saved money only for the passion of having it. Although, "Don Francisco habría sido así en otra época; pero no pudo eximirse de la influencia de esta segunda mitad del siglo XIX, que casi ha hecho una religión de las materialidades decorosas de la existencia" (12). ["Don Francisco could have been a man like that in another time; but he couldn't escape the influences of this second half of the nineteenth century, which has almost made a religion out of the respectable material goods of life".] The cultural influences around him have caused him to change his views about handling his money and to be swept up in the materialism of the times.

Because of this, Don Francisco has reached a point in his life where he is looking for ways to spend his money and live a better life, but not to show more charity in his relations with others. He is not able to understand that there could be a higher level of existence other than the day-to-day reality in which he prospers, and when a friend, a defrocked priest, talks to him about the reality of God: "Lo único que don Franciso sacaba de toda aquella monserga era que *Dios es la Humanidad*, y que la Humanidad es la que nos hace pagar

nuestras picardías o nos premia por nuestras buenas obras” (25). [“The only thing that Don Francisco, got out of all that confused ranting was that God is humanity, and that it is humanity which makes us pay for our misdeeds or rewards us for our good works”.] None of this moral lesson stayed with Don Francisco and he continued to occupy himself with ‘la baja realidad de sus negocios” (26). [“the base reality of his businesses”.]

The stereotypical turn which Torquemada’s character might be expected to take is set up by the formulaic and melodramatic illness of his brilliant son, Valentín. Torquemada has a flash of inspiration, following his discussion of God as humanity, that his own lack of charity has led to his son’s illness. He feels he has failed humanity and God by not showing the kindness toward others that he should have. With a new resolve he determines to change his ways so that God will not take his son.

He becomes desperate, swears to live a better life, and becomes angry if anyone recalls his past greed and harsh treatment of those who could not pay him what he was owed. For example, when he goes to collect rent, one of his tenants is surprised at his willingness to let them delay payment. He loses his temper and asks “¿Y quién te dice a ti, grandísima tal, deslenguada y bocona, que yo vengo a sofocarte? A ver si

hay alguna tarasca de éstas que sostenga que yo no tengo humanidad" (31). ["who told you, you slut, filthy bigmouth, that I've come to smother you? Let's see if there is one of those hags that can say I don't have any humanity".]

Later, on his way home after a day of business he passes a beggar, but he does not give him anything in spite of the fact that a "Cara más venerable no se podía encontrar sino en las estampas del *Año Cristiano*. Tenía la barba erizada y la frente llena de arrugas, como San Pedro" (41). ["a more venerable face couldn't be found except in the illustrations in *The Christian Year*. He had a bristly beard and a brow full of wrinkles like Saint Peter".] True charity would seem to be indifferent to appearances but here since the beggar looked like a saint, Torquemada should have helped him. Obviously, this is a jibe at the stereotypical world of simplistic thinking.

After walking past, he says to himself that he would have given the beggar his cape if he had only been wearing the old one and not the new one. Arriving home he realizes what he has done and mutters "!Maldito de mi; No debí dejar escapar aquel acto de cristiandad" (42). ["Damn me! I shouldn't let that act of Christian charity escape me".] He takes his old cape, rushes out, gives it away, and returns feeling very self-satisfied. He later promises the old cleaning lady that if his

son lives he will sleep on a rag pallet and eat the poorest food possible.

In another example of his new found 'charity', Torquemada decides to help an artist who is dying and needs money. However, he takes the interest out of the loan before giving the money and then takes some of the artist's best works as collateral, with an eye on them appreciating in value after the artist has died.

However, any suggestion of a true change of heart on the part of this miser is merely empty pretense and when Torquemada's son dies, Galdós fails to bring him to repentance for his past lack of generosity or to any awareness of his failings as a caring human. Torquemada regrets the kindness he had shown during his son's illness and willfully goes back to his old avaricious ways. There is no consolation for the reader who might wish to have his beliefs affirmed that those who are greedy and unfeeling will ultimately see the need to become wiser and charitable.

An incident which might appear to be an act of remembrance of his dead son is actually an ironic comment on the calculating nature of nineteenth-century society. Valentín was a mathematical prodigy and when he died there was a small slate in his room with some of the calculations he had been working on. Torquemada takes the slate, puts a shroud around

it and puts it on the wall, a tiny shrine to his son and to the process that he has followed in accumulating his wealth. However, the emphasis on calculating does not stop there.

Torquemada gives his son a magnificent burial, but only after getting information from various funeral homes and negotiating a good price. The day after the funeral, he is back at work seized by "la fiebre de los negocios terrenos" (72) ["the fever of earthly business"], scribbling numbers, calculating the profits and losses of his dealings. The old family servant sees him at work and tells him "Ya está otra vez preparando los trastos de ahorcar. Mala muerte va usted a tener, condenado de Dios, si no se enmienda" (73). ["Once again you're preparing the things to hang folks. You're going to have a bad death, god-damned sinner, if you don't repent".]

But, he simply renounces any of the charity he has shown others and says that in the future "La misericordia que yo tenga, ¡puñales!, que me la claven en la frente" (73). ["Any pity I have in the future, dammit! They can nail it to my forehead."]

*Torquemada en la hoguera* is the first of a four-novel series, but it can be viewed as a work complete in itself; the next volume in the series did not appear until 1893. In *Torquemada y San Pedro*, the final volume, it is Torquemada who tries unsuccessfully on his death bed to buy his way into

heaven by making a donation to the church. That the Torquemada novels are meant as an indictment of the materialism of the times is clear, but it is also clear that Galdós makes Torquemada a well rounded character who allows the reader no chance for a comforting vision of how those who have material wealth can come to have pity for those who have little or nothing.

*Torquemada en la hoguera* gives us an ironic twist on the tragic form. In *Miau*, we have a similar situation in that the novel has a clear tragic structure, but one that leaves the reader unable to say definitely whether the central figure Ramón Villaamil comes to a true recognition of the mistakes he has made in his life. This ambivalence is characteristic of Galdós who is never willing to let the reader glean facile truths from his works. As Eamonn Rodgers points out, Galdós knew that for the average reader of fiction "Complexities, ambiguities and grey areas are awkward. It is much easier to postulate a series of clear oppositions between good and bad characters, moral and immoral behaviour, justice and injustice" (*Miau* 13). Because of this, Galdós regularly uses a variety of literary techniques, not to deny that there is a moral decision to be made about his characters, but to show that the decision is far from simple and can be approached from a variety of perspectives.

Villaamil is the 'ideal type' of the *cesante*, the government worker who was laid off every time there was a change of administration. Those who had won the election brought their friends in with them and those who had served earlier under another party lost their jobs. Galdós took this well-known figure in Spanish life and used Villaamil's sufferings as a tool to analyze the materialism and corruption of the society he saw around him. The novel is often ironically humorous but behind that humor is a bitter commentary and the novel is "in its final essence, the result of a wise and percipient artist's attempt to judge his contemporaries in their concrete historical and national circumstances, by moral standards which are perennially relevant" (Rodgers, *Miau* 72).

Villaamil has been dismissed from the Spanish bureaucracy just two months before he was eligible to retire and the novel's main narrative line involves his efforts to get his job back so he can work long enough to retire with a large enough pension to support his family. To do so involves a desperate struggle with a host of unresponsive offices and officials. The choice of figure actually relates this novel to themes and characters that were common in nineteenth-century literature. Alexander A. Parker points out that the bureaucratic civil service was an important part of the

nineteenth-century idea of a state as political entity and one thing Galdós is looking at in *Miau* is "the inhuman machine-like character of this bureaucracy" (16).

Because Villaamil cannot retire and has no job, his family is threatened with ruin. He tries to get his old job back, but not simply because his family needs money. He seems to have no identity outside the administration and appears incapable of seeing himself as doing anything else in life, perhaps because he is too old and there are no other possibilities, but this is never fully clear. It is part of Galdós's artistic ambiguity that we can see both Villaamil's helplessness to do anything different than what he does and his lack of initiative to try anything new.

He is not a businessman, as the other main characters I have looked at in this study are, but he did hold a good, if minor, position in the government. His fantasy life is taken up with getting his job back so that he can implement projects which he sees himself as having invented to make the Spanish civil service function more efficiently and to raise more revenue for the state. His main project to improve the government has to do, appropriately, with instituting an income tax in Spain.

Villaamil finds himself trapped in a situation which is the result of political changes which he seems unable to

grasp; this is his 'iron cage'. The reader knows there has been an election and a resulting change of administration in the government and, as is the custom, all the workers affiliated with the old party are out. Instead of accepting this situation and looking for other ways to make money, he continues to see himself as a tortured soul who has been unjustly laid off.

It is here that a major critical decision has to be made as to whether Villaamil is a tragic figure or simply a pathetic incompetent who is unable to manage his life. Galdós leaves this issue unclear and either point of view can be argued with evidence from the text, depending on which part of Villaamil's trajectory through the novel one chooses to emphasize. His reaction to his dismissal does show his tragically weak inability to function in the world as he finds it, but on the other hand perhaps the situation he was in was too desperate for anyone to solve. As Herbert Ramsden points out, Villaamil "is not a static character, to be studied globally as responsible or not responsible for his fate: he is a character in evolution, reacting—and ultimately breaking—under the force of circumstances beyond his control" (75). Again, a final interpretation of his nature depends on whether one wants to stress the individual's response to social conditions or society's power over the individual. I would

agree that "Galdos's main concern as a novelist was with social relationships and not with individual psychology" (Scanlon 61). He is emphasizing the historical moment and its impact on an individual, rather than bringing to the forefront the possibility of Villaamil's having reacted differently to the political changes, even if it appears that he could have done so.

Villaamil goes so far as to see himself as a Christ figure, even if there is often an almost humorous use of religious allusions mocking him for seeing himself in this manner. Once, when he is upset about his situation, Villaamil, "aprensivo y sobresaltado, se desperazaba en su asiento como si quisiera crucificarse" (109). ["Apprehensive and over excited, stretched himself out in his chair as if he wanted to crucify himself."] Galdós does poke fun at his constant complaining and we read that

Dio Villaamil un gran suspiro, clavando los ojos en el techo. El tigre inválido se transfiguraba. Tenía la expresión sublime de un apóstol en el momento en que le están martirizando por la fe, algo del San Bartolomé de Ribera cuando le suspenden del árbol.  
(46)

[Villaamil gave a big sigh, nailing his eyes to the ceiling. The crippled tiger transfigured. He had the sublime expression of an apostle at the moment when he is being martyred for his faith, something like Ribera's Saint Bartholomew when they are hanging him from the tree.]

There is no question that he has been treated unfairly, but the reader can see that his sufferings are at least in part the result of his own failings. If his story is a tragedy it is not simply because of unjust treatment by the government but because he simply could not see any other way to act. He had closed his mind to any other vision of the world except that of the government worker and continued to visualize reality in those terms. He is a *cesante* and therefore a typical victim of social change, albeit one who does not have the energy to fight successfully to regain his place and is given to fits of depression when faced with difficulties.

One evening during a family gathering, Villaamil leaves the others and "huyó de la sala buscando en el interior oscuro de la casa las tinieblas que convenían a su pesimismo" (93). ["fled the room searching in the dark interior of the house the shadows that were suitable for his pessimism".] There is evidence that he is more than partly responsible for putting himself in a cage with no escape.

However, I believe he is a tragic figure, someone who is literally driven to a fatal desperation by having been caught in a historical situation which he cannot solve and through him we are given a view of what is happening in Spanish society. It appears that Villaamil accepts the ideology of his world and is not a radical. His position with the state plays

a large part in how he defines himself, and his tragedy originates at the very basic level of his being as a person. He sees the corruption of the state bureaucracy but is angered by it only to the extent that it affects him. He sees the nature of society, but is not willing to reject the materialism or the basic structure that has led to his quandary.

Instead of rejecting the very basis of Spanish society, Villaamil interprets his problems as the result of personal vendettas or maliciousness on the part of his former colleagues and supervisors. He is a complainer who laments his mistreatment by the government but who never goes so far as to question the values which are leading him to a tragic end or his own mistakes. For him, there is one theme which is constant, that he has been mistreated by the administration. For example, here is a selection of quotes showing his negative outlook:

"En este mundo no hay más que egoísmo, ingratitud, y mientras más infames se ven, más quedan por ver" (45). ["in this world there is only selfishness, ingratitude, and the more injustice one sees, there are still more to come."];

"No me vengas a mí con optimismos de engañifa. Te digo y te redigo que no entraré en la combinación. No tengo ninguna esperanza, pero ninguna" (84). ["Don't come to me with optimism and tricks. I tell you again and again that I will never get back to work. I have no hope, none."];

"¡Tenlo por cierto! ¡No me colocan hasta el día del juicio por la tarde!" (91) ("Believe it for certain. They won't give me my job back until the afternoon of the day of judgment.");

Villaamil hundíase más y más en su estudiado pesimismo, llegando al extremo de decir: "Antes veremos salir el sol por occidente que a mí entrar en la oficina" (145). ["Villaamil sank more and more into his pessimism, reaching the extreme of saying 'We'll see the sun come up in the west before you'll see me go back to work.'"];

"Yo no me hacía ilusiones ni ése es el camino," dijo bruscamente y con arrebatado de ira don Ramón, elevando las manos hasta muy cerca del techo, "Yo no tuve nunca esperanzas. . . yo no creí que me colocasen, ni lo volveré a creer jamás" (161) ["I didn't have any illusions and that's not the way", said don Ramon, raising his hands almost to the ceiling, "I never had any hope. I never believed that they would give me my job and I will never believe it."]; and,

"¡A mí! ¡Colocarme a mí! (con furor pesimista.) Dios no protege más que a los pillos. . . ¿Crees que espero algo del Ministro ni de Dios? Todos son lo mismo. . . ¡Arriba y abajo, farsa, favoritismo!" (267) ["'To me! Give a job to me!' (with pessimistic fury.) 'God doesn't help anyone but the crooks. Do you think I expect anything from the Ministry or from God? Everyone is the same. . . above and below farces, favoritism.'"]

But even with this constant and sometimes irritating litany of negativism, we are shown that there may well be justification for the way he feels. In fact, Gullón points out that Villamil's case has a "supertexto. . . arbitrariedad del poder e indefensión del individuo" (9). ["Supertext. . . the arbitrariness of power and the helplessness of the individual."] Villaamil apparently was a faithful civil

servant and even served abroad on several occasions, mostly so that he could have a large enough salary to support his wife's spending habits. He was forced to return from the Philippines when he became ill with dysentery and then did not go abroad again up to the moment when he was let go.

It is possible to argue that he is merely a bungler and mishandles his search for employment. He continues to haunt the offices where he worked and to badger his friends and former bosses with letters asking for help and money. In Spain, where favoritism was obviously more important than qualifications, he could perhaps have tried another way to find work once it was obvious that he did not have the appropriate connections.

His wife feels he is not doing enough to get his job back and attacks him one night:

"¡Inocente!. . . Ahí tienes por lo que estás como estás, olvidado y en la miseria; por no tener ni pizca de trastienda y ser tan devoto de *San Escrúpulo bendito*. Créeme, eso ya no es honradez, es sosería y necesidad" (61)

["Innocent! That's why you are how you are, forgotten and in poverty; because you don't have any sense and are a follower of *blessed Saint Scruples*. Believe me, this is not honesty, it's innocence and stupidity."]

She counsels him to go on the attack in order to get his job back and threaten to take everything he knows about the administration to the newspapers. However, her attacking him

is another irony in the novel since we learn that she is not supportive in the least and, in her own way, also unable to deal with reality. When he lost his job and the family was threatened with ruin, there were no savings to fall back on because "Pura había tenido siempre el arte de no ahorrar un céntimo, y una gracia especial para que la paga de primero de mes hallase la bolsa mas limpia que una patena" (134). ["Pura had always had the art of not saving a cent, and the special talent that the pay on the first of the month would find her purse clean as a whistle."] She was not above pawning everything in the house but had to keep the furniture in the front rooms so that she could maintain her image as a government official's wife.

But, we are also shown that Villaamil's way of handling things is not the only way. Federico Ruiz, Villaamil's acquaintance, finds himself in a similar situation but his reaction to his unemployment is quite different. His relaxed and optimistic attitude helps him to cope with his problems. He has come to terms with his poverty and seems to enjoy the challenge of trying to find money to live. He has turned to journalism and writes articles about everything he can think of, and about many subjects of which he has absolutely no knowledge. In the end, he does find employment and is able to avoid the disaster of total financial ruin which threatens

Villaamil, who can never stop seeing himself simply in the status of someone who has been wronged by the world. Ruiz, who unlike Villaamil receives the loving support of his wife, says how being poor is an interesting experience:

El estar satisfecho venía a ser en él como una cuestión de amor propio, y por no dar su brazo a torcer se encariñaba a fuerza de imaginación, con la idea de la pobreza, llegando hasta el absurdo de pensar que la mayor delicia del mundo es no tener un real ni de dónde sacarlo. Buscarse la vida, salir por la mañana discurrendo a qué editor de revista enferma o periódico moribundo llevar el artículo hecho la noche anterior, constituía una serie de emociones que no pueden saborear los ricos. (87)

[To be satisfied came to be for him almost a question of self respect, and in order not to give up, by force of will, he came to like the idea of poverty, getting to the absurd point of thinking that not having any money nor a place to get any was the best thing in the world. To go out looking for life, go out in the morning scheming about which sick magazine or dead newspaper should he take an article to that he had written the night before provides a series of emotions that the rich can never enjoy.]

That there is irony here is obvious. Ruiz is perhaps feigning an attitude which he does not really feel, but he may really be speaking the truth. In other works, such an optimistic approach to life is seen as positive by Galdós, who held that the material things of life were not enough to satisfy a person spiritually. For example, in Galdós's classic novel *Misericordia* (1897), [*Compassion*, in English]), Benina, the central character is a penniless beggar who must go out

each day to beg for money which she immediately gives away to others in need. She is a totally selfless and loving person who constantly makes the needs of others more important than her own. She does so with an open and optimistic view on life, one that is the opposite of Villamil's and similar to Ruiz's.

However, having an attitude toward the world like either Ruiz or Benina is impossible for Villaamil, and his wife does not provide him with much help. She sees him only as a failure who can no longer provide money for the family so that the wife, sister-in-law, and daughter can keep up the style of life to which they are accustomed. That is, the superficial commonness of showy furniture, nights at the opera, and gossip.

When he is nearing the moment of killing himself, he talks to the birds in a way that again we, as readers, can see as ironic:

"Coman, coman tranquilos. . . Si Pura hubiera seguido vuestro sistema, otro gallo nos cantará. Pues ella no entiende de acomodarse a la realidad. ¿Cabe algo más natural que encerrarse en los límites de lo posible? Que no hay más que patatas. . . pues patatas. . . Que mejora la situación y se puede ascender hasta la perdiz. . . pues perdiz. Pero no, señor, ella no está contenta sin perdiz a diario."  
(357)

["Eat, eat happily. . . if Pura had followed your example, we'd be in a different situation. But she didn't know how to adjust to reality. Is there anything more natural than adjusting yourself to the limits of the possible. If there's nothing but

potatoes. . . well, potatoes. When things get better then you can go up to having pheasant. But, no sir, she wanted pheasant every day."]

Obviously, neither he nor his wife could adjust to the reality of the situation and they continued in the same path to the end. Villaamil is so totally absorbed in his problems that he fails to see that his obsessive quest to be reemployed is hurting the others in his life. For example, one evening he is undressing his grandson and because he is still fuming about some perceived ill treatment, does not even notice that he is being so rough that he is hurting him.

"Hijo mio, ve aprendiendo, ve aprendiendo para cuando seas hombre. Del que está caído nadie se acuerda y lo que hacen es patearle y dstrozarle para que no se pueda levantar. . . Figúrate tú que yo debiera ser Jefe de Administacion de segunda, pues ahora me tocaría ascender con arreglo a la ley de Cánovas del 76, y aquí me tienes pereciendo. . .

"Abuelo, que me arrancas las piernas."

A lo que el irritado Viejo contestó secamente.

"Por fuerza tiene que haber un enemigo oculto, algún trasto que se ha propuesto hundirme, deshonorarme" (67).

["My child, go on learning, go on learning, for when you are a man. No one remembers a man who is down and what they will do is kick him and destroy him so that he can't get up. . . Do you know I should be second administrative supervisor, now it would be my turn to get a raise under the '76 law of Canovas, and here I am dying. . ."

"Grandfather, you're pulling my legs off."

To which the irritated old man answered dryly.

"There has to be an enemy hidden somewhere, some jerk who wants to drag me down, dishonor me.]

This is one of the clearest examples of how Villaamil has simply allowed his preoccupation with getting his job back to become more important than his family. He has also not even noticed that Victor Cadalso, the former husband of Villaamil's deceased daughter Luisa and father of Luisito, has come to visit the family and is trying to amuse himself by seducing the other sister Abelarda. He is so totally absorbed with the task of getting his job back that he notices nothing of what is going on around him.

One of the recurring figures in the novel is the word 'Miau', [as in 'meow'] which is used disrespectfully by some to refer to the women in Villaamil's family who have a catlike appearance. The word is a recurring motif throughout the novel and there is some discussion as to what the letters stand for. At the end, just before Villaamil commits suicide, he overhears the workers in his office ridiculing his ideas. One jokester had written down some notes after Villaamil started haranguing them about what was necessary to make the government function better and the letters in Miau stood for "Moralidad. Income tax. Aduanas. Unificación de la Deuda" (206, English in the original.) [Morality. Income tax. Customs. Debt Unification.] At the end of the novel, just before committing suicide, Villaamil says the letters stand for "Muerte... Infamante... Al... Universo" (362). [infamous

death to the universe.] Toward the end he carries his self pity to the point of seeing himself as a true Christ figure:

"con las iniciales de los títulos de mis cuatro Memorias ha compuesto Guillén el mote de *Miau*, que me aplica en las aleluyas. Yo lo acepto. Esa M, esa I, esa A y esa U son como el *Inri*, el letrero infame que le pusieron a Cristo en la cruz. . . .Ya que me han crucificado entre ladrones para que todo sea completo, pónganme sobre la cabeza estas cuatro letras en que se hace mofa y escarnio de mi gran misión." (304)

["with the initials of the titles of my four memorandums Guillen has composed the nickname of *Miau*, that they give me in hallelujah. I accept it. This M, this I, this A and this U are like the *Inri*, the famous sign that they put on Christ on the cross. Now that they have crucified me between thieves so everything will be complete they should put over my head those four letters that ridicule and punish my great mission".]

On the day after a particularly violent argument at his former workplace where he had gone again for help to get his position back, he buys a revolver which he will use to kill himself. He sets out walking around Madrid and there is a moment in which the beauty of the world becomes clear to him and his reason seems to connect with the outside world in a new way:

"¡Qué hermoso es esto!" se dijo soltando el embozo de la capa, que le daba mucho calor. " Paréceme que lo veo por primera vez en mi vida, o que en este momento se acaban de crear esta sierra, estos árboles, y este cielo. Verdad que en mi perra existencia llena de trabajos y preocupaciones, no he tenido tiempo de mirar para arriba ni para enfrente. . . Siempre con los ojos hacia abajo, hacia esta

puerca tierra que no vale dos cominos, hacia la muy marrana Administración." (352)

["How beautiful this is," he said loosening his cape which was too warm. "It seems as though I'm seeing it for the first time in my life, or as if at this moment the mountains, the trees, the sky were just created. True that in my miserable existence full of work and worries, I haven't had time to look up or in front of me. . . Always I've had my eyes looking down, toward this filthy earth that isn't worth two cents, toward that piggish administration."]

But there is only a momentary flash of insight into the potential beauty of human existence before he immediately returns to his rambling condemnation of everything, even worrying whether the pistol will actually work if he tries to kill himself and when it does, his consciousness lasts only long enough to say "pues. . . si" (371). ["Well. . . yes."]

As we saw in *Torquemada*, Galdós is often unwilling to console the reader with simple answers. However, I believe that for Galdós, Villaamil, although he may lack the usual traits of a heroic figure, is a tragic figure who is crushed because he cannot adjust to the demands of the historic moment. The situation in which he found himself was such that it is unreasonable to expect anyone to be able to be successful in it. Caught in the grip of an uncaring bureaucracy, he is shunted from one office to another, from one disappointment to another.

He could have looked for other employment, he could have controlled his wife, whose spendthrift habits added to his troubles, or he could have taken his role as father and grandfather more seriously. However, because of his obsession with getting back his position he neglects his family duties and everyone suffers. His vision of reality becomes more and more solipsistic until at the end only death can free him. The 'iron cage' he is in had gotten smaller and smaller until it crushed him.

#### End Notes

1. Spanish citations are from *Las novellas de Torquemada*. Madrid: Alianza, 1996, and from *Miau*. Madrid: Alianza, 1999. English translations are my own.

## CHAPTER 6

### *BUDDENBROOKS*

#### I

#### Background

Thomas Mann (1875-1955) was born in the north German town of Lübeck, the setting for most of the action in *Buddenbrooks*. While the work is obviously autobiographical, there are major differences between his family history and the events in the novel which reflect his artistic and philosophical intentions. Although the novel is clearly in the realist tradition and it does give an accurate vision of the life of the commercial class in Germany at that time, Mann was not simply retelling youthful memories.

As in the novel, Mann's father had for many years been the owner of the family firm of commission agents and grain merchants and had held the honorary position of consul for Holland and been elected Senator. Mann's mother was born in Brazil but educated in Lübeck at a boarding school. Mann attributed much of his character to his parents: a strong work ethic from his father and a passionate, aesthetic side from his mother. After the father's death, the family moved to Munich where Mann finished his schooling.

He did not like school and left without his Abitur, the certificate needed for an academic career at universities in Germany. After working a short while in an insurance agency he began publishing his short stories and left his job to embark on a career in journalism. He also studied history, economics, aesthetics, and literature as a part-time student at the Technical University in Munich.

*Buddenbrooks*, finished in May 1900 and published in 1901, received modest attention at first but with a cheaper one-volume edition in 1902, the novel began to sell more widely and is still his most popular work. The novel is set during a critical period of German history in the nineteenth century, especially as relates to the economic structure. When the 1800s began, the individual firm such as that of the Buddenbrook family was the major economic force in Germany. But by the end of the century, business in Germany was more like that of today, with laissez faire competition, a volatile capital market, joint-stock companies and stock markets. Business became more susceptible to faraway economic and social factors and the way was opened for the new type of entrepreneur who could take advantage of the new high-risk business environment. Competition at all levels of business became fiercer and remote political and economic changes affected local business conditions. We have already seen the

particular effects of these changes throughout Europe and the United States in other novels studied here.

Because of his family background, Mann was uniquely prepared to chronicle events in Lübeck's business environment and to make them come alive. In fact, Derek Parker points out "there was no trouble at all in identifying most of the characters in the novel with Lübeck citizens" (9). Shortly after publication, a list of which fictional characters represented which real characters circulated in the town.

Mann went on to have a long and distinguished career as one of Europe's greatest writers and received the Nobel Prize in 1929. In 1933, with Hitler's rise to power, he left Germany for good. After the war he settled in Switzerland where he lived until his death.

Economic growth in Germany took place against a backdrop of specific political changes. The Congress of Vienna, after Napoleon's defeat, created the German Confederation of 38 separate states and four free cities. Such fragmentation was obviously a handicap for business but by the end of the 1830s a customs union which reduced duties between the various members began to provide a wider market for all business.

Otto von Bismarck is credited with forging the various wars and power struggles that led to German unification in

1871 when the German Empire was proclaimed under Kaiser Wilhelm I.

## II

### A Reading

*Buddenbrooks* is a long novel which can arguably be said to have the family as tragic figure; it does after all have "Verfall einer Familie" ["The decline of a family"] as a subtitle. However, although it is the family that declines, for the purposes of this study the major tragic figure is taken to be Thomas Buddenbrook, and secondly his sister Tony Buddenbrook. Both are tragic figures who are destroyed by the choices they make when confronted with the same sort of cultural changes we have seen in the other novels studied here.

Their brother Christian is also a major character, but does not seem to fit the concept of tragedy presented here. He is the idle, directionless dreamer, who seemingly would have failed in any society. He is expected to work in the firm like Thomas, but is unable to maintain his interest in the work. His restless nature leads him to travel to England, Chile, and then to other cities in Germany, but he is never able to put down any roots. Christian is the actor who has no role to play in society. He lapses in and out of pointless reveries about the past and is a great storyteller, but his stories often

have no point. He wastes his time at the theater, or with shiftless friends, or with women who share his dissolute character. Since he plays no serious role in society, I feel he could certainly be deemed a tragic figure if only because of the sad way in which he wasted his life. However, there appears to be no society in which he could have succeeded. His role in the novel is as the image of all that Thomas hates but is afraid that he will become. And it is the slow realization by Thomas that he has had to fight his whole life against what appears to have been his true nature that leads him to tell Christian that

"Ich bin geworden wie ich bin," sagte er endlich, und seine Stimme klang bewegt, "weil ich nicht werden wollte wie du. Wenn ich dich innerlich gemieden habe, so geschah es, weil ich mich vor dir hüten muss, weil dein Sein und Wesen eine Gefahr für mich ist. . . ich spreche die Wahrheit." (580, Mann's ellipses.)

["I have become what I am," Thomas said at last, with emotion in his voice, "because I did not want to become like you. If I have inwardly shrunk away from you, it was because I had to protect myself from you, because your nature and character are a danger to me. I am speaking the truth."] (563)

Christian is a trial to everyone and ends his life in a mental asylum, put there by a woman with a dubious past whom he had married. He is a tragic figure, but it is difficult to think of any society or time when he could have avoided his fate, or to attach too much blame to the society in which he

lived, no matter what it was like. As a character he seems, perhaps, to be outside of history, and the approach taken here is not fully applicable to him.

Christian is the most obviously decadent character in the novel and an emphasis on certain of his and Thomas's characteristics that indicate decay has, it appears to me, led some critics to overemphasize the idea of decadence in the novel. For example, R.J. Hollingdale sums this up by saying that

*Buddenbrooks*, then, presents us with a vast programme of decline: of decline as loss of wealth, of decline as loss of status, of decline as loss of moral certainty and fibre, of decline as 'artistic decadence': but underpinning them all is decline as physiological decay. The Buddenbrook family becomes sick—the rest follows. (151)

That the book is 'about' decay or decline is obvious, as indicated in the title. The question, however, is: What is decaying or declining? and, Why? My thesis involves decline, the decline of moral and family values in a capitalist system where money has become all important. I feel the Buddenbrooks decline because they cannot contend with the cultural forces which threaten their kind of life. I will make clear that the family members, under pressure from a changing world, make bad decisions because they let tradition and money play too great a role in their lives. There is decline in the family but its causes are not limited to purely internal factors, sickness,

aesthetic aspirations, or hyper-sensibility. These are not causes of decline, but symptoms. If the book is about 'decline' or 'decay', Mann has given no cause for this. My thesis is that the decay results from the family's inability to adjust to changing cultural circumstances. I most certainly disagree with a critic such as R. Hinton Thomas who asserts that

We hear extraordinarily little about the broader world. Any connexion between the events concerning this particular family and the objective social and economic developments are, except incidentally, ignored or disregarded. (49)

It is inconceivable to me that someone who had read the novel could write this. The developments in the 'broader world' are clearly going on around the Buddenbrook family: business is being done, political change is obvious, there are wars, ships are sailing, people are traveling, and the culture is changing. Decline or decadence is described at length in the novel, but no **cause** for this decline or decadence is put forth **in the text** except wrong decisions concerning 'objective social and economic developments', i.e., cultural change. The Buddenbrooks do decline but they do so in the specific culture in which they live.

Mann obviously meant to ground this novel in the cultural reality of the time and in an essay printed as the foreword to a translation of the work, we read that before writing the

book, he had to find a source for the particulars of life in Lübeck because "I found I did not know enough. All sorts of questions about business, municipal affairs, economic history, and politics" (Lübeck x). The novel was not only true to German society but actually to the cultural and economic reality of other countries. Mann found later and was pleased that "a work seemingly so specifically German in form and creative impulse should be a valid commentary on international conditions" ("Lübeck" xiii).

I think I will show here that the history of the times is the actual supporting structure on which this novel is built. In the text itself, and not considering anything which Mann may have claimed later about his aims for the novel, it is clear that *Buddenbrooks* has repeated references to social, political, and economic conditions which would have been clear to the reader for which it was intended and which provide a very reasonable explanation for the family's decline. As Williams pointed out

[Tragedy's] most common historical setting is the period preceding the substantial breakdown and transformation of an important culture. Its condition is the real tension between old and new: between received beliefs, embodied in institutions and responses, and newly and vividly experienced contradictions and possibilities. (*Tragedy* 54)

Clearly, Mann has meant to place the family, and any causes for its decay, in a specific historic setting. Georg

Lukács accepts the idea of decadence as being important in the novel, but says that it is only part of Mann's belief that the "patrician culture of the Buddenbrooks is doomed and the Hagenströms rule the new Germany. . . . In this sense the Buddenbrooks saga is the story of what happens to Germany's cultural traditions in the nineteenth century" (21).

And as Judith Ryan points out:

The downward movement traced by *Buddenbrooks* is configured on one level as a decline in physical and mental health, on another as a complex shift in values. Conventional religion, family traditions, speculative philosophy, mythology, scepticism and economic pragmatism are the main components in the novel's portrayal of this shift. Mann is careful to avoid representing value systems in any simplistic way. (130)

In fact, if one takes another approach, it is possible to argue that *Buddenbrooks* is a novel of both decline and rise. For example, T.J. Reed notes "the decline of the family's old vitality and outward standing. . . and the rise (nowhere so precisely labeled) of inward qualities - intellect, artistic sensibility, creative potential" (2). If this is so, one would have to at least consider that what is being presented is that in the specific culture of the novel, those rising characteristics lead inevitably to tragedy.

However, to emphasize the elements of internal aesthetic decay in the family is simply to ignore the cultural forces that led to the family's decline. The Buddenbrook family was

caught in history and in a social position which simply did not let them adapt to changing times. I believe this aspect of the novel will be clear from my analysis.

For Mann, Thomas and Tony Buddenbrook are 'ideal types' because their personal stories reveal so much of the story of their society. They were anchored in their world and tried everything possible to live the role that their place in the culture had given them. For example, Tony tried to be the woman that her family and society expected her to be and in showing her personal struggle, Mann could analyze many aspects of a woman's life of that time. Thomas had to fill the role of businessman, father, and inheritor of a tradition. With him, Mann had a vehicle which allowed him to consider all aspects of a middle-class businessman's life.

Their failure to succeed is tragic because, I would argue, under other circumstances they could have succeeded in life and could have been happy. However, their tragic lives provided Mann with the specific tools he needed to reveal the changing relationship between personal belief and cultural reality inherent in the changing environment in which the two lived. The prominence of the Buddenbrook family led both Thomas and Tony to expect certain things from life and to view their place in society from a particular perspective, but the

historical and cultural reality in which they found themselves simply defied their expectations.

Tony Buddenbrook is a clear victim of the patriarchal society in which she lives, but seemingly a victim who is willing to play the part that society has given her and never becomes fully conscious of how that society has shaped her existence. She is willing to suppress her personal desires and ambitions for what she sees as the greater good of the family, which for her has far more importance than the feelings or personal happiness of any of its individual members.

Oddly, although it would appear that Mann meant Thomas to be the major tragic figure in this novel, it is Tony's words "Was ist das?" (7) ["What does this mean?" (3)]<sup>1</sup> that open the novel and it is her doubts about the Christian afterlife that close it. That she has such a major role in the novel might indicate that to emphasize the decadent characteristics of Thomas and Christian, e.g. bad teeth, aches and pains, neurotic worries, and illness, may be a distortion of the reality of the novel.

In the opening line, Tony inquires about a fine point in her catechism and amuses her grandfather. She says "Ich glaube, dass mich Gott fügte" (7) ["I believe that God made me" (3)] but ultimately, by the end of the novel, her doubts about the religion she has been taught become tangible. She

seems not to reach a full tragic awareness of her position but she does come to doubt the justice of the world. Her tragedy would be one of unfulfilled aspirations, unrealized because she never becomes aware that she allows herself to be forced into situations that cannot make her happy. Hannelore Mundt says that "Tony has an unrivaled will to honor and perpetuate the reputation and prestige of the Buddenbrooks. Her self-identity and womanhood are inextricably bound to the name of the family" (278).

The opening words about religion are not accidental. Mann clearly is interested in religion's relationship to the wider culture, including business. Like Weber, Mann did intend in his novel to show how religion had played a role in the development of capitalism and will show how the commercial class could "reconcile financial gain and industry with a sense of religious purpose" (Travers 21). The handling of money was an ethical act with religious associations and one of the main sins which Tony's two husbands commit is that they do not follow the family's code in making and handling money.

Throughout the novel it is Tony's clinging to the name of the family as an ultimate value in her life that shapes the way she lives. She faces disappointment with a strong conviction that she remains a superior representative of a superior class. Just before her marriage to Grünlich she is

sitting at the table and her mother tells her "deine Haltung ist nicht *comme il faut*" (92, French in original). ["your pose is not exactly *comme il faut*" (92).] Her brother says "Das schadet nichts". . . "Sie kann sitzen, wie sie will, sie bleibt immer Tony Buddenbrook" (92). ["it doesn't matter. . . She can sit however she likes, she'll always be Tony Buddenbrook" (92).] She is who she is and this distorted sense of self makes her unaware of how little she really knows of the world. She has all the illusions and ignorance of a spoiled child—when Grünlich's proposal of marriage is discussed, she wonders if as his wife she will drink chocolate every morning.

When it becomes obvious that Grünlich is showing an interest in her as a potential wife, her parents begin to calculate whether such a marriage would bring profit to the firm. She cannot understand at first what Grünlich wants from her and after one of his visits she comments on his appearance and mocks him. Her father breaks in and says "er ist ein christlicher, tüchtiger, tätiger und fein gebildeter Mann, und du, Tony, ein grosses Mädchen von 18 oder nächstens 19 Jahren. . . du solltest deine Tadelsucht bezähmen" (99). ["he is a hardworking Christian and a well-educated man. And you Tony are a grown young lady of eighteen, soon to be nineteen . . . you should curb your fault finding" (97).]

Tony's father does not rely on Grünlich's appearance and makes inquiries about his financial standing. He is told by bankers and associates that his daughter's suitor is a prosperous and reliable businessman, in other words, a perfect match for his daughter. Tony's mother pushes the marriage and tells her that "diese Heirat genau das ist, was Pflicht und Bestimmung dir vorschreiben. . . Der Weg, der sich dir heute eröffnet hat, ist der dir vorgeschriebene, das weisst du selbst recht wohl" (105). ["this marriage is precisely the sort to which duty and destiny call you. . . The path opening before you today is the one to which destiny has called you, as you well know" (103).]

Tony, in spite of finding Grünlich unattractive, if not definitely repulsive, considers the match. She knows that it is the man's calling to work and make money and that it is the woman's calling to marry in such a way that it brings profit and increased reputation to the family firm.

Sie war sich ihrer Verpflichtungen gegen die Familie und die Firma wohl bewusst, und sie war stolz auf diese Verpflichtungen. Sie, Antonie Buddenbrook, vor der der Träger Matthiesen tief seinen rauhen Cylinder abnahm, und die als Tochter des Konsuls Buddenbrook in der Stadt wie eine kleine Herrscherin umherging, war von der Geschichte ihrer Familie durchdrungen. . . Sie hatte den **Beruf**, auf ihre Art den Glanz der Familie und der Firma 'Johann Buddenbrook' zu fördern, indem sie eine reiche und vornehme Heirat einging. (105, my emphasis. Note the use of the word "Beruf" as in Max Weber.)

[She was quite aware of her obligations to her family and the firm, was proud of those obligations. She was Antonie Buddenbrook--Consul Buddenbrook's daughter, who walked about town like a young princess, to whom Matthiessen the grain hauler doffed his homely top hat. Her family's history was in her bones. . . Her calling in life was to add to the luster of her family and the firm of Johann Buddenbrook by marrying a wealthy and prominent man." (103, my emphasis. Note the use of the word "calling" as in Max Weber.)]

However, she is repulsed by Grünlich and even though she knows her duty, she resists the match. During the time she is being asked to consider the marriage she goes to the seashore for a lengthy stay, her parents obviously expecting her to come to her senses and agree with their wishes. While there, she meets Morten Schwarzkopf, the son of the sea captain she is staying with and a "standardised portrait of a politically committed student of the day" (Ridley 18). Morten's references to his life as a student and his opinions would have been clear to the reader of the time and would have given a political tone to his relationship with Tony. Although Tony may not actually come to love him very deeply, she certainly is intrigued by his liberal ideas and appears to have more feelings for him than for the man she is being asked to marry.

Morten, although he is a medical student and can look forward to a professional life, is very aware of the difference in social standing between them and refers to her as a princess. He says to her

Sie haben Sympathie für die Adligen. . . . soll ich Ihnen sagen warum? Weil Sie selbst eine Adlige sind! Ja-ha, haben Sie das noch nicht gewusst? . . . Ihr Vater ist ein grosser Herr, und Sie sind eine Prinzess. Ein Abgrund trennt Sie von uns Andern, die wir nicht zu Ihrem Kreise von herrschenden Familien gehören. (138, Mann's ellipses)

[“Your sympathies are with the nobility—and do you want me to tell you why? Because you’re an aristocrat yourself. Ah yes, didn’t you know that? Your father is a great sovereign, and you are a princess, separated by an abyss from all us others, who don’t belong to your circle of ruling families.” (135-136)]

Ridley has questioned the use of the word ‘princess’ to describe her, arguing that the family’s “prosperity went back little further than war-profiteering in the Napoleonic period” (19). He feels Morten’s view of her social position is a romantic exaggeration, but I think he misses the point here. We have seen Irene Lapham referred to as the ‘paint princess’ and the title does not refer to heritage as in the aristocracy but, even if in jest, to current wealth and standing. Tony is a young princess in the new ‘aristocracy’ based on money and not birth that emerged in the nineteenth century.

The seaside town where she and Morten meet is marked by the same kind of rigid class relations as one would find in any aristocracy and Tony repeatedly refers to the fact that someone she has met or passed has not shown her the proper respect, or that she has refused to notice someone who was her social inferior.

She begins to love the medical student and writes to her family about her feelings. Her father answers telling her that she will surely see reason because "Wir sind, meine liebe Tochter, nicht *dafür* geboren, was wir mit kurzsichtigen Augen für unser eigenes, kleines, persönliches Glück halten, denn wir sind nicht lose, unabhängige und für sich bestehende Einzelwesen, sondern wie Glieder in einer Kette" (146) ["We are not born, my dear daughter, to pursue our own small personal happiness, for we are not separate, independent, self-subsisting individuals but links in a chain" (144).], and it is her duty to marry properly and follow tradition. Her father obviously tells Grünlich what is going on at the seashore and he goes there and barges in unexpectedly to speak with Morten's father. His mission succeeds: the student is sent back to school and Tony is taken back to Lübeck.

At home, her father purposely leaves out the gilt-edged notebook which has a record of the family history extending back to its earliest members and which is one of the controlling images in the novel. Tony sees it and reads how each family event, weddings, births, deaths, has been written down, "Denn war nicht der geringsten Eine Gottes Wille und Werk, der die Geschicke der Familie wunderbar gelenkt?" (157). ["for was not even the most insignificant event the will and work of God, who wonderfully guided the destinies of this

family?" (155).] She is overwhelmed by the presence of all that had gone before and suddenly makes the fatal decision to marry the man her parents have picked for her. She writes in the book after her name, "Verlobte sich am 22. September 1845 mit Herrn Bendix Grünlich, Kaufmann zu Hamburg" (158).

["Engaged on 22 September 1845 to Herr Bendix Grünlich, merchant from Hamburg" (156).] She sees this as a grand gesture of support for the family but Herbert Lehnert argues that the "representation of the destruction of Tony Buddenbrook's love is the novel's most prominent accusation of the bourgeois lifestyle in the novel" (47). Derek Parker makes clear that "The tension between profit (though family loyalty is also emphasized) and love is, of course, a main theme of the book" and the characters always come down on the side opposite to love (11). As we will see with Thomas's marriage, a poor choice leads to failure. It seems clear to me that Tony and Thomas, had they chosen otherwise, would have had happier even if less socially acceptable marriages. They reject honest feelings because their social position requires them to do so.

Predictably, the marriage is not a happy one but Tony does her duty and tries to live the settled life expected of a woman of her class. She spends too much money and expects her husband to provide whatever is needed. She has no intentions of correcting any faults of temperament that may trouble her

marriage. Her will is that of a princess and she should have her way. "Sie war, ohne es selbst zu wissen, der Meinung, dass jede Eigenschaft, gleichviel welcher Art, ein Erbstück, eine Familientradition bedeute und folglich etwas Ehrwürdiges sei, wovor man in jedem Falle Respekt haben müsse" (203). ["She believed, without knowing it, that absolutely every character trait was a family heirloom, a piece of tradition, and therefore something venerable and worthy of respect, no matter what" (201).]

This self-absorbed confidence in her own character will carry her through the years with all her mistakes and she will never really question why she must always bend to the tradition in which she lives. Only at the end do we see any uncertainty about the justice of it all. The marriage to Grünlich results in a daughter who will in turn repeat the mother's unhappy mistake and marry an insurance salesman who is imprisoned for fraud. He too made a good impression and was seen as a good match but was dishonest and brought a new disgrace on the family.

Grünlich has lied all along about his financial position and only sought out Tony for her dowry. In January of 1850, Mann is specific about the date, Grünlich writes to Tony's father that he needs financial help. The father visits the young couple and finds that Grünlich's financial standing is

truly desperate. However, he refuses to help his son-in-law, advising him as he takes Tony and Erika away, "*Beten Sie*" (230). [*"pray"* (226).]

When the consul tells his daughter that her husband is bankrupt she is shocked. "'Bankerott'. . . das war etwas Grässlicheres als der Tod, das War Tumult, Zusammenbruch, Ruin, Schmach, Schande, Verzweiflung und Elend" (214).

[ "'Bankrupt'—that was something more ghastly than death, it was chaos, collapse, ruin, disgrace, humiliation, despair, and misery" (211).] Obviously, if the accumulation of wealth is a moral act within a religious tradition, the loss of one's wealth due to mismanagement is a humiliating sin. Grünlich has failed morally and Tony's attitude toward him is the same as what we have seen with Villamil's wife and Goriot's daughters: a man is a source of money and when he no longer can provide it, he is a failure as a man. The divorce is ultimately granted because Grünlich is unable to support the family and Tony dutifully notes the fact in the family history.

The marriage was actually a complex negotiation about finances and it reveals clearly that Tony's father was inept in certain aspects of the new business climate in that he expected everyone to deal with him honestly and truthfully, especially when he inquired about the reputation of his daughter's suitor. Although it was a personal miscalculation

on his part, it is clear here that this is a historical reference. Times have changed and the old way of doing business by simply trusting the word of one's associates is no longer possible.

Herr Kesselmeier, Grünlich's main creditor, taunts the consul about this, saying "Ahah? Erkundigungen? Bei wem? Bei Bock? Bei Goudstikker? Bei Petersen? Bei Massmann & Timm? Die waren ja alle engagiert! Die waren ja Alle ganz ungeheuer engagiert! Die waren ja Alle ungemeine froh, dass sie durch die Heirat sicher gestellt wurden" (228). ["Aha? Inquiries? And of whom? Of Bock? Goudstikker? Petersen? Massman & Timm? They were all in on it. They were all in up to their ears. They were only too glad to see a marriage that would provide them some security" (223).]

Tony and her daughter return home where she must struggle to overcome the stigma of having been married to a bankrupt and to being a divorced woman. For her father, "Er fühlte in seinem Stolz als Geschäftsmann sich bitter gekränkt und verwand schweigend die Schmach, so plump übers Ohr gehauen worden zu sein" (233). ["His pride as a man of business had been grievously wounded, and he wrestled in silence with the disgrace of having been swindled so badly" (229).]

But later, Tony consents to another marriage that has no great love in it because she feels it is her family duty to

marry again. Thomas, now the head of the family, and her mother are urging her to marry and remove the stain of the divorce from the family name. She sees this also, but, given her energetic character, she also admits that she is bored at home and anxious to have her own independent life. However, family concerns are most important. She says

um mein Glück handelt es sich eigentlich gar nicht dabei, sondern, indem ich diese zweite Ehe eingehe, mache ich nur in aller Ruhe und Selbstverständlichkeit meine erste Ehe wieder gut, denn das ist meine Pflicht unserem Namen gegenüber. So denkt Mutter, und so denkt Tom. (341)

[It's not even a matter of my happiness. But by marrying a second time, very calm and cool, simply as a matter of course, I'm making up for my first marriage. It's my duty, I owe that much to our family name. That's what Mother thinks, that's what Tom thinks (334-335).]

Unfortunately, Herr Parmeneder's fun-loving south German personality clashes with the rigidity of Tony's character. As soon as they are settled in Munich he decides to give up business and live off the interest from her dowry and the rents of the house they own. She is upset by this lack of ambition but the final blow comes when she finds her drunken husband trying to kiss the maid. It is of interest that he is not shown as a negative character, unlike Grünlich, but truly someone who is culturally incompatible with his rigid wife. He even agrees later when they divorce to return the dowry. After

she leaves him and returns home, Tony tries to justify herself to Tom by saying

"Was er mir und unserem Namen schuldig ist, das hat er vergessen. . . das hat er nicht gewusst von Anfang an! Ein Mann, der sich mit der Mitgift seiner Frau ganz einfach zur Ruhe setzt! Ein Mann ohne Ehrgeiz, ohne Streben, ohne Ziele! Ein Mann, der statt des Blutes einen dickflüssigen Malz-und Hopfenbrei in den Adern hat. . . ja, davon bin ich überzeugt. . . der sich dann noch zu solchen Niedrigkeiten herbeilässt, wie dies mit der Babette, und, wenn man ihm seine Nichtswürdigkeit vorhält, mit einem Worte antwortet. . . einem Worte. . ." (377, Mann's ellipses.)

["What he forgot was the respect he owes me and our family name—he never understood that from the very beginning. A man who takes his wife's dowry and simply retires. A man without any ambition, any drive, any goal in life. A man who has a gooey mixture of malt and hops in his veins instead of blood—yes, I truly believe he does. And then to sink to such a vulgarity as this with Babette, and, when confronted with his own depravity, he replies by calling me a name. . . a name. . ." (367)]

The name he called her, the lack of respect, is apparently what determines her to leave. That, and as she admits later, the fact that she cannot adjust to life in the south of Germany, where the culture is different and she is not known. It was upsetting to her to find that in the south of Germany there was nothing extraordinary about being a Buddenbrook. The family name brought her no particular respect and she could not feel comfortable in such an environment. The cultural comparison between two regions of Germany is clear and shows again how much of this kind of comparative analysis

of "the broader world" can be done with only a few references. We learn later that Permaneder had shouted at her "*Saulud'r dreckats!*" (394). ["you filthy sow, you slut!" (383).]

Tony apparently does not come to a full tragic recognition of the stifling nature of the life she has lived because she held so tightly to her Buddenbrook identity. She thought her life would have an orderly and predictable course but things did not work out as she had expected, but she is able only to put the blame for her and her family's sufferings on her two ex-husbands or an inexplicably harsh world. There is no point at which one could definitely say that she recognizes how her own mistakes or oppressive cultural factors have contributed to the family's fall. She never seems to come to terms with the contradictions between what she expected of life and her own experience. However, she does have some doubts at the end, at least as to whether the Christian heaven really exists. After Hanno's funeral, Friederike Buddenbrook says that they will see their deceased friends and family in heaven. Tony answers

"Ja, so sagt man. . . Ach, es gibt Stunden, Friederike, wo es kein Trost ist, Gott strafe mich, wo man irre wird an der Gerechtigkeit, an der Güte. . . an Allem. Das Leben, wisst ihr, zerbricht so Manches in uns, es lässt so manchen Glauben zu schanden werden." (758, Mann's ellipses.)

["Yes, that's what they say. Oh, there are times, Friederike, when that is no comfort. God strike me,

but sometimes I doubt there is any justice, any goodness. I doubt it all. Life, you see, crushes things deep inside us, it shatters our faith".  
(730)]

Tony does have some doubts about the justice of the world, but she does not seem to ever question her rigid ideas about the nature of her family's position in the world and the way she has been forced to conform to that position. Thomas Buddenbrook, on the other hand, is the one person in the novel who develops most clearly into a tragic figure, the one who most clearly fits the tragic model being developed here in this study. Mann's vision of that form in the novel, one unfolding of the tragic which he develops, is that of a sensitive and serious character who cannot function in a rigid materialistic culture which puts profit and tradition ahead of human desire and growth.

Thomas's life is a long battle to fit into the role that he has been born into. It is a battle to play the role and at the end when he fully realizes how much of an actor he has been and that the role is no longer satisfying to him, he dies soon after. The tragic form used as structure in all other novels studied here is clear.

Thomas "der seit seiner Geburt bereits zum Kaufmann und künftigen Inhaber der Firma bestimmt war" (65). ["was destined from birth to be a merchant and the future owner of the firm"

(63).] He was a member, like Tony, of the new commercial nobility and one who dedicated his life to satisfying the demands of that role. From his early years, he was the one picked to succeed his father. "Augenscheinlich waren auf Thomas Buddenbrook grössere Hoffnungen zu setzen, als auf seiner Bruder. Sein Benehmen war gleichmässig und von verständiger Munterkeit" (67). ["It was obvious that greater hopes were to be placed in Thomas Buddenbrook than in his brother. He conducted himself sensibly, cheerfully, even-temperedly" (65).]

His father, who as we have seen considers himself very clearly as a link in a chain, assumes that Tom will be the one to carry on the family tradition. We are told "Eines schmerzte den Konsul: dass nämlich der Vater nicht mehr den Eintritt seines ältesten Enkels ins Geschäft hatte erleben dürfen" (74). ["there was one thing that the consul regretted; that his father had not lived to see his eldest grandson join the firm" (73).] Like Tony, Tom is a link in the chain of events which make up his family's successful commercial history. When he was 16, he wore men's clothes and "Um seinen Hals hing die lange goldene Uhrkette, die der Grossvater ihm zugesprochen hatte, und an der ein Medaillon mit dem Wappen der Familie hing, diesem melancholischen Wappenschilder" (74). ["Around his neck hung the long gold watch chain that his grandfather had

promised him, its fob a medallion that displayed the rather mournful family coat of arms" (73).] The symbolism is obvious: the family coat of arms is mournful, perhaps representing in part the suffering resulting from the oppression of ordinary feelings for the sake of the family firm, but it is attached to the watch, to time itself, and to the chain that represents his family history. Tom also inherits a signet ring that supposedly had been worn by the founding member of the family which had been passed down, along with the family bible. The family exists in time and all its members will have to complete their destiny as links in the chain, as beings in time.

Thomas struggles to form an individual identity within the constraints of his social position but at the same time even as he succeeds in life he must deal with the fact that he is seen against the background of his family history. His own identity is merged in the identity of his family:

Das Prestige Thomas Buddenbrooks war anderer Art. Er war nicht nur er selbst; man ehrte in ihm noch die unvergessenen Persönlichkeiten seines Vaters, Grossvaters and Urgrossvaters, und abgesehen von seinen eigenen geschäftlichen und öffentlichen Erfolgen war er der Träger eines hundertjährigen Bürgerruhmes. (410)

[Thomas Buddenbrook's prestige was of a different sort. He was not just one man—people honored in him the unique and unforgettable contributions of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather; quite apart from his own success in commercial and public

affairs, he was the representative of a century of civic excellence. (402)]

From the first we see that Thomas has to distort his own nature to follow his destiny in the firm. He gives up the salesgirl he loves to go away, accepting without resistance the social reality that he cannot marry her. Ironically, we see later that she will marry a man of her own social station and have strong healthy children. Further, she is a woman who would have helped the family prosper as we are told several times that she runs her business alone.

Thomas renounces love for the demands of family and will ultimately marry Gerda, the refined aesthete who plays the violin and is apparently unfaithful to him, and have a son who rejects him and everything he has spent his life trying to accomplish. We have been shown this situation before when Gesualdo did not even consider marrying the humble working girl who loved him and had given him sons that could have helped him in his life.

Hanno, the result of Thomas's unsuccessful marriage, will die of typhus as an adolescent and the family name will die with him. Rather than saying that the decline of the family in the person of Hanno was necessary, Mann has indicated that to keep the family going was extremely difficult and required all its members to ignore personal feelings and live in a way that

would truly lead to prosperity. Thomas violates this principle and satisfies a whim by marrying the elegant and artistic woman he does. His marriage can be compared to the marriages of the earlier members of the family which were based strictly on family and financial considerations, but within a different social environment. At one point, Hanno is reprimanded for drawing a line under his name in the family history, the same one in which Tony had written of her marriage. He says, "Ich glaubte. . . ich glaubte. . . es käme nichts mehr. . ." (524). ["I thought. . . I thought . . . there wouldn't be anything more" (510).] And, of course, after his death the family name will disappear.

After his father dies, Thomas will take over the business but no matter how hard he tries he does not share his father's abilities or beliefs. He became the head of the business at a young age, but there are already hints that he is not ready for the position. He is pale and his hands give a hint of the weakness at the base of his personality. They are white and not like the strong Buddenbrook hands of the other men in his family. He is often tired and even when he was young "Seine Zähne waren nicht besonders schön, sondern klein and gelblich" (16), ["His teeth were not very good, were small and yellowish" (11)] and will eventually decay and when pulled

apparently provide the stress which leads to the stroke or heart attack which kills him. At one point, he asks himself

War er ein praktischer Mensch oder ein zärtlicher Träumer?

Ach, diese Frage hatte er sich schon tausendmal gestellt, und er hatte sie, in starken und zuversichtlichen Stunden, bald so und -in müden - bald so beantwortet. Aber er war zu scharfsinnig und ehrlich, als dass er sich nicht schliesslich die Wahrheit hätte gestehen müssen, dass er ein Gemisch von Beidem sei. (470)

[was he a practical man or a tenderhearted dreamer?

Oh, he had asked himself that question a thousand times and responded in one way in his strong and optimistic moments, and in another when he was weary. But he was too perceptive and honest not to admit the truth—he was a mixture of both. (462)]

Clearly, Thomas is struggling to deal with the contradictions in his life. He is an actor and has become totally self-conscious of his role as a solid businessmen and it is no longer natural to him. But his changed view of himself and his family is only a more dramatic example of what can be seen earlier in his own father. As Erich Heller points out "Johann Buddenbrook is the first Buddenbrook to suffer the pangs of self-awareness, and the last whose will is still strong enough to force its way through the gathering crowd of ideas" (42). The earlier members of the family lived a confident life, free of self-doubt. In the novel, the male characters have become self-conscious. They are aware of

themselves as living the life they do. It is no longer natural to them.

The differences between Thomas and his ancestors have become clear even to the townsmen. When a group of men were discussing his marriage to Gerda, they expressed their feelings that his new wife was a little pretentious and perhaps not quite honest, and they shake their heads and say "Aber es war Konsul Buddenbrook. . . es sah ihm ähnlich. Ein bisschen präventiös, dieser Thomas Buddenbrook, ein bisschen. . . anders: Anders auch als seine Vorfahren" (294). ["But it was just like Consul Buddenbrook—he was a little pretentious. Thomas Buddenbrook was, a little . . . different. Different from his forebears" (288, Mann's ellipses).] Unlike Tony, he chose a wife strictly for her beauty and his pleasure and the marriage does not really work. Oddly, by following the commercial code, the cultural constraints which Gotthold and Christian violate, he chose not to marry the woman who was most likely to help him succeed.

The differences between the inner and outer man, both in appearance and reality is a clear theme in the novel, but as I point out, the real point is the clash between individual and culture. Tom's clothes, including his underwear, are expensive and brought from Hamburg. He changes his shirt every day and perfumes his handkerchief and his mustache. He dresses

elegantly, quotes poetry, and tries in that way to express a personality that has been stunted by his forcing himself into a role that is not totally his own. He has been pretending since he was very young to be something he is not, and the weight of the Buddenbrook tradition becomes too heavy for him.

Wirklich! Thomas Buddenbrooks Dasein war kein anders mehr, als das eines Schauspielers, eines solchen aber, dessen ganzes Leben bis auf die geringste und alltöglichste Kleinigkeit zu einer einzigen Produktion geworden ist, einer Produktion, die mit Ausnahme einiger weniger und kurzer Stunden des Alleinseins und der Abspannung beständig alle Kräfte in Anspruch nimmt und verzehrt. (614)

[No doubt of it--Thomas Buddenbrook's existence was no different from that of an actor, but one whose whole life has become a single production, down to the smallest, most workaday detail--a production that, apart from a few brief hours each day, constantly engaged and devoured all his energies. (597)]

He becomes more and more aware that he is playing a role but sees no escape. He wants to continue the family tradition but slowly realizes that he cannot be who his father and grandfather had been. He cannot live up to the demands of family tradition and he is also not the new kind of bustling, energetic entrepreneur that is taking over business. After he is elected senator, we find that "obgleich Thomas Buddenbrook kaum 37 Jahre zählte, ganz einfach ein Nachlassen seiner Spannkraft, eine raschere Abnützbarkeit. . ." (419, Mann's ellipsis). ["the underlying reality was that at age thirty-

seven Thomas Buddenbrook was losing his edge, was wearing out too quickly" (410).]

He maintains his role but only at the cost of becoming exhausted. The life he leads is not natural to him and when he leaves his home he must put on the mask of who he is supposed to be. One day he is out with Hanno, who suddenly becomes aware that his father hides his true feelings behind a mask of pleasant optimism, and realizes that he will be expected to do the same thing in the future. At the thought, "schloss Hanno mit einem Schauder angstvollen Widerstrebens seine Augen" (628). ["he closed his eyes with a shudder of fear and aversion" (608).]

Business is slumping and he can only attribute it to his own weakness, to his own inability to carry on the family business as before, but we see that much of the firm's problems are beyond anyone's control. For example, he invests in a grain crop but loses the money when the crop is destroyed by a hailstorm and the armistice ending the Austro-Prussian war results in the bankruptcy of a Frankfurt company and heavy losses for the firm.

The Buddenbrook family declines but we cannot extrapolate from this to some large general truth about decadent times or the necessary decay of a family. As Ridley points out, other members of the commercial class were thriving. Hagenström who

buys their old house in spite of the opposition of Tony is one of them. Hagenström is a symbol of the coming culture and his buying the family home, in reality replacing the family, has a deeper meaning. He is figuratively and literally taking over from people like Thomas. Hagenström has also inherited certain values from his father, but those values make him even more prepared to benefit from social and economic change. We are told that

Gewiss, wenn Konsul Hagenström irgend einer Tradition lebte, so war es die von seinem Vater, dem alten Hinrich Hagenström, übernommene unbeschränkte, fortgeschrittene, duldsame und vorurteilsfreie Denkungsart, und hierauf gründete sich die Bewunderung, die er genoss." (410)

[No doubt of it—if any tradition governed Consul Hagenström's life, it was the totally open, progressive, tolerant and unbiased outlook he had inherited from his father, old Hinrich Hagenström—and this formed the basis of the general admiration he enjoyed. (402)]

Mann is looking for a particular nexus of the psychological and the cultural, of the individual and the social. The family falls partly because some of its members are unable to function in the role history has given them and partly because of changing historical conditions. It is not possible to clearly isolate one factor in the family's decline, and Mann did not intend the reader to have a simplistic view of what happened. This is not only about the decline of a German class because of social and economic

change or about the isolation of the sensitive artist in the crass material world of nineteenth-century capitalism, rather it is about all of these things and more. The family does decline, but if the family members had made different choices within their cultural reality, then their story would have been different. There is no historical explanation of Thomas's lack of strength or for Christian's inability to fix on one direction for his life, however, if the society in which the family was placed had been different, their story would also have been different.

Weber was a contemporary of Mann and the great sociologist said simply at the end of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that "it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialist an equally one-sided spiritualist causal interpretation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible" (183). Judging by the novel, Mann shares this balanced approach and is proposing neither a strict individual nor historical interpretation of how human life evolves. It can't be stated any clearer than by Judith Ryan:

More than many of its contemporaries, *Buddenbrooks* is alert to the discursive and imaginative construction of culture. It does not simply transpose historical reality into narrative form; it shows this reality being created in human minds as they interact with others, driven at once by actual

cultural history and by ambiguous, never fully  
articulable forces. (134)

Mann's novel is an exploration of how both factors, the  
individual and the historical, come together in each  
individual to give form to his or her life.

End Notes

1. German citations are from *Buddenbrooks*. Berlin:  
Fischer, 2000. The English text is from *Buddenbrooks*. New  
York: Vintage International, 1994.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

This study has revealed important aspects of the relationship between money and tragedy in the nineteenth-century novel. Specifically, I have shown how *Le Père Goriot* (1834), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884-1885), *Mastro-Don Gesualdo* (1888), *Miau* (1888), and *Buddenbrooks* (1901) are all concerned with how economic and social change, especially the critical importance of money in daily life, had tragic consequences for specific individual characters.

Although the works studied here have at times been described as 'tragic' by other critics, it has not been seen clearly that these novels as a group are examples of a specific Euro-American theme: the middle-class businessman or bureaucrat living within the volatile capitalist society of the Industrial Revolution and whose tragic fate is related to the function of money in society. The novelists studied here used tragedy, a specific cultural and literary form in Euro-American culture, as a tool to analyze what they saw happening around them. The events of each novel would have been familiar to each country's readers who lived each day knowing fully the consequences of losing one's money or being defeated by the

physical and mental demands associated with rapid cultural change and the struggle for prosperity.

These novels were all translated into different languages and the values, ideas, and incidents they contained were easy to understand for readers in other European or American countries as world capitalism evolved and changed the culture in which they lived. The fact that each of these novels has a similar tragic structure is a clear indication of how each country was seen to be going through similar changes. One of the common themes in many novels of the nineteenth century, including those in this study, is that the members of the commercial and financial sectors of society formed a new class of people whose position and values were tied to the economic and political forces that were changing society. We see in the novels studied here that Goriot and Gesualdo are living at a time when the rule of the aristocracy is giving way to the new capitalist democracy, Lapham and Buddenbrook see the commercial environment evolving rapidly and with tragic consequences for each, and Villaamil is caught in the struggle between two political administrations.

Balzac, Howells, Verga, Galdós, and Mann, were all uniquely qualified to analyze how the massive social changes of the nineteenth century were affecting the lives of those living during that time. They had lengthy journalistic careers

and by the choice of incident and character in their novels worked to give a clear and analytical portrait of the society in which they lived. These novelists had the stated aim to faithfully reproduce what they saw happening around them. They were all influenced by the Euro-American tradition of realism and all, except Balzac, of course, had their writings influenced by French Naturalism. Howells and Galdós, however, reserved the author's privilege of commenting directly in their novels on social and moral questions. As their nations were part of a world economy, these novelists were all part of a world literature.

These novels all have a tragic structure that can be described in terms taken from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Each novel has a plot based on reversal, recognition and pathos, and central figures with positions of at least some prominence in society and whose tragic fall is due to errors or flaws in judgment. Goriot, Lapham, Villaamil, Gesualdo, and Thomas Buddenbrook all come to at least a partial recognition of the tragic role that money has played in their lives and all, except Lapham, die at the end. However, Lapham's fate is shown to be tragic because he has lost his identity as a successful businessman, and without that he is only a sad and broken survivor of the struggle for wealth and power.

In the novels studied here, suffering is individual, but it results from a collective and social situation. The characters make individual choices, with at least some semblance of independence, but their fates are determined by social conditions, including accepted ideas as to ultimate values. Everyone is shown to live within a culture, within a total way of life that shapes their decisions. The classic idea of fate or destiny as an element in tragedy is supplanted by the idea of social and economic forces which limit the possibility of individual choice.

The moral issues in these novels primarily concern relationships between people and not relationships between people and some other level metaphysical or religious significance. There is an occasional mention of God or religion, but the tragedy is secular and occurs at the level of family and personal relations and involves human suffering. The tragic protagonists violate traditional values related to how they should deal with family members and other personal relationships. To varying degrees, they come to treat others as abstractions and to make money more important than the people in their lives, and they suffer for this.

These tragedies are meant to clarify or reveal the state of society, but not necessarily to give the reader some sense of comfort that all will be well. Even though there is

suffering and tragedy, the economic world will go on as before, and there is no real hope that the increasing monetization of all aspects of human life will change. These tragedies hold out little hope of redemption.

This study relies heavily on insights provided by the work of Max Weber and Georg Simmel, two important figures in the 'classic period' of sociology who looked at the same phenomena as the novelists I am studying did and saw that in nineteenth-century Western capitalism there were certain situations which were tragic. These two writers were German but their work was meant as a study of how economic and social change was affecting all of contemporary Euro-American culture.

For example, the fact that the protagonists accepted the capitalist credo that making money is a good in itself is one of the key points noted by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Rise of Capitalism*. He goes so far as to find a religious origin for the words *Beruf*, in German, and *calling*, in English, words which are often used to designate business careers. Those who sought to become richer accepted the idea that the process of making money had moral value, but over time they found there was no escape from a life they had based on the pursuit of money. The drive to succeed in capitalist

society could become an 'iron cage' (*Ethic* 181) which locked the individual into the economic system.

The tragic form we see in these novels provides a conceptual framework to interpret human experience in much the same way. These novelists not only saw how their literary protagonists were trapped in the 'iron cage' of a life built on the drive to become rich, but also that death was often the only escape for them. When money is not enough to give meaning to life or when the tragic figure can no longer earn enough money to meet his business or family obligations, we see that each man's "destruction has been initiated in [himself]" (Simmel, *Tragedy* 43). He set the rules and defined himself in such a way that his very being leads to destruction. When the values he has lived by crumble, his life becomes meaningless.

Even though the novels studied here present a wide variety of complex individuals, all have central male characters who share a grouping of various elements, including having sole responsibility for earning the family's money, suffering stress and disillusionment from an often harsh economic competition, and allowing calculation to become a part of their human relationships with a resulting alienation from others. Further, they all have daughters or sisters and have to contend with the financial and social factors that come into play when there is a marriage. The novelists used

these central figures as 'ideal types,' much as Weber did, to analyze the society they saw around them.

Weber and Simmel both pointed out that rationalization in the form of careful calculation is a trademark of western capitalism and repeatedly in these novels we see that every human relationship, including family relations, marriage, and friendship, is subjected to cold rational calculation involving gain and loss, much as any business deal.

Even though Weber argued that the capitalist belief structure can be traced back to Calvinism, it is clear that the novels considered here contain very little of the overtly religious. Weber understood that and argued that the religious asceticism and validation of this way of life had been worn away by Enlightenment humanism but that the moral importance of having a calling to the business world had remained as a cultural value. The spiritual struggles of the principal characters in the novels studied here are secular in nature, but seem at times to take the form of religious doubt and their doubt relates to the place of money in their lives.

Simmel also pointed out two other characteristics of a money economy that are clear in the novels studied here. First, he points out how exchanges between individuals in the money economy are complex events involving calculation of relative value. Second, he shows that gratitude is a feeling

that binds social life when there is no formalized contractual basis for obligation.

The main figures in these novels are all forced to continually calculate the value of the exchanges they make and it is clear that they often fail tragically in the exchange value of their transactions with other people. They monetize all aspects of their existence and often believe they can pay for love and respect, but when they give up the money they have worked so hard to earn, they receive little of value in exchange. Repeatedly, in even the most intimate family situations, those they help or give money to show little gratitude. The result of this is often anger and even more alienation and the central figures in these novels, with the exception of Silas Lapham, end their lives in bitter resentment because what they have done has not been appreciated by those closest to them. When the alienation from their family is such that they do not receive any recognition or gratitude for what they have given, the disillusionment they feel is a contributing factor to their tragic fall.

In conclusion, I feel I have shown that these novels do include powerful tragedies which reveal aspects of human cultural reality which we may not see so clearly without the insights they provide. Tragedy as a literary form was an important tool which the writers I have studied here used to

reveal a deep and shifting reality behind the sometimes stereotypical and dehumanized image of the capitalist expansion and economic growth of the Industrial Revolution. Although written in five different languages and in five different countries, these novels looked at a common human situation as the world economy changed the cultural reality in which people lived.

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## VITA

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