

# Orange Inheritance Reading Guide

## *Eugénie Grandet* by Honoré de Balzac

### Chosen by Rose Tremain

**'English literature has some memorable stony-hearted misers but they pale beside Balzac's provincial Midas, Monsieur Grandet, father of the long-suffering Eugénie' *Guardian***

#### About Eugénie Grandet

Monsieur Grandet is a rich cooper whose chief care is his gold. He runs his household in the gossip-ridden village of Saumur with exacting miserly attention and his wife and daughter suffer a Spartan existence. On the evening of his daughter Eugénie's twenty-third birthday his foppish nephew Charles suddenly arrives from Paris. Eugénie has never known passion in her sheltered and barren existence. Now, in an instant, she falls in love and her life is changed forever. Monsieur Grandet will not countenance his daughter's marriage to her penniless cousin and Eugénie's determination to follow her heart leads her into direct conflict with her father. Charles is sent to the West Indies to earn his fortune, whilst Eugénie waits patiently at home under the tyrannical captivity of her father. Seven years later, after the death of both of Eugénie's parents, Charles returns home. But during his seven year absence he has grown to value more worldly goods than the simple love of his cousin and returns not to Saumur, but to Paris.

#### Characters

**Old Grandet/Monsieur Grandet of Saumur** – the miserly millionaire who engineers the events of the story according to his avarice

**Eugénie Grandet** – Old Grandet's daughter and heiress, sought after by several local bachelors

**Madame Grandet** – Old Grandet's frail and browbeaten wife

**Nanon** – the fiercely loyal servant of the Grandet household

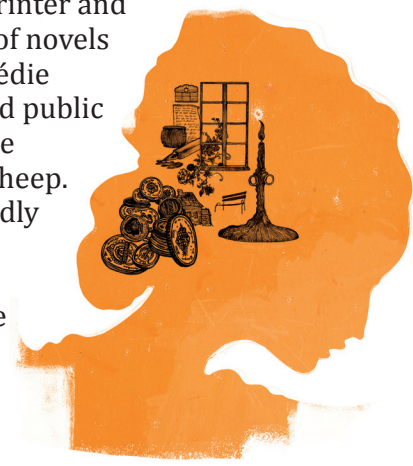
**Monsieur Charles Grandet** – Old Grandet's nephew with whom Eugénie falls in love

**The des Grassins:** Monsieur des Grassins, Madame des Grassins, and their son Adolphe des Grassins, one of Eugénie's suitors

**The Cruchotins:** Abbé Cruchot; Maître Cruchot, the notary and friend of Old Grandet; and his nephew Monsieur Cruchot, president of the Civil courts of Saumur, later known as Monsieur de Bonfons and Monsieur le président, who eventually marries Eugénie

#### About the Author

Honoré de Balzac was born 20 May 1799, the second son of a civil servant. He was brought up away from his family home, first in the care of a wet-nurse and then at a strict grammar school at Vendôme. Balzac then studied at the Sorbonne, before entering training to become a lawyer, like his father. At the age of twenty, to the consternation of his family, he announced his intention to abandon law and become a writer. His early literary works met with little success, and Balzac's various business ventures as a printer and publisher also foundered. In 1829, he began to conceive a grand design for a series of novels comprehensively portraying French society in the eighteenth century. Balzac's *Comédie humaine* became his life's work, comprising 91 separate works depicting private and public life in the town and country, in politics and the military. Masterpieces of the *Comédie humaine* include *Eugénie Grandet*, *Père Goirot*, *The Wild Ass's Skin* and *The Black Sheep*. Many of his novels were critically acclaimed on publication, and went on to profoundly influence authors from Marcel Proust and Gustave Flaubert to Charles Dickens and Henry James. At the age of fifty-one, Balzac was finally able to marry the recently widowed Evelina Hanska, whom he had loved for eighteen years. But by this time he was in very poor health and Balzac died only five months after his wedding, on 18 August 1850.



## Points for Discussion

Old Grandet occasionally expresses sympathy toward Nanon, an apparently redeeming emotion in him, but Balzac describes how 'such compassion arising in the heart of the miser, and accepted gratefully by the old spinster, had something inconceivably horrible about it'. What do you think Grandet's pity for Nanon arises from and what is it that makes this emotion 'inconceivably horrible'?

Consider the scene in which Eugénie presents her savings to Charles. It is at this moment that Eugénie is halfway between childhood and adulthood, 'as much a woman as a young girl'. Eugénie's transition from childhood to adulthood is equated with her learning the value of money, but also the value of love. Similarly, Charles is thrust into adulthood by the bankruptcy and death of his father, but this transition is eased by the growing love between himself and his cousin. How are these lessons different for the two of them? And how do they each go on to develop their understanding of the positions of love and money in the adult world?

Relationships are repeatedly expressed in the language of transaction. Discuss the following comments: 'She received and gave...the most unreserved of kisses'

'After the kiss taken in the passage, the hours fled for Eugénie with frightful rapidity'

"'You ought to kiss me on the eyelids for telling you the secrets and the mysteries of the life and death of money'" Old Grandet to Eugénie

"'This is how business should be done. Life is a business. I bless you! you are a virtuous girl, and you love your father'" Old Grandet to Eugénie after she has relinquished her inheritance from her dead mother into the hands of her father

To what extent are all relationships within the novel based on personal (and often material) gain. Are any of the characters free from this confusion of human values and material worth? Is Eugénie free of it?

Nanon is the character in the Grandet household who most freely expresses herself. How does Balzac use and invert the servant-master relationship?

Compare Charles's love for Annette with his love for Eugénie. Do you believe in either affection?

At the end of the novel, when Charles has returned to Paris, we are told that he 'breathed more at his ease in Paris, conscious that he now had a part to play'. Do you believe that his return to the shallowness and extravagances of city life, and his cruel treatment of Eugénie, was the only possible outcome for Charles? The temptation is to blame Old Grandet for Charles's experiences and his resultant temperament, but to what extent can it be argued that Charles alone is to blame?

Charles writes to Eugénie 'we owe ourselves to our children'. In many ways this is the fallacy that allows the characters to act in the way that they do. Consider the relationships between child and parent; compare the relationships between Old Grandet and Eugénie, and between Charles and his father. Which relationship seems more genuine?

Balzac directly opposes the values of money and of religion, particularly through the figures of Old Grandet and Madame Grandet, yet at Old Grandet's death Balzac states that 'Christianity must always be the religion of misers'. Balzac is drawing a parallel between the concept of 'giving an account of your life' before God in death, and balancing your accounts materially in life. Who are the characters in the novel accountable to, each other, their material possessions, or God? To what extent could it be argued that religion also becomes a currency within the novel, to be traded and earned? Consider Eugénie's conversation with the curé.

'In all situations women have more cause for suffering than men, and they suffer more.' Balzac was a male writer in a male-dominated society, but to what extent does he adopt the female perspective in his writing? Do we see more frequently from the perspective of Eugénie or her father? Do you feel that Balzac is more sympathetic towards men or women?

