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Balzac’s Women and the Impossibility of Redemption in 
*Cousin Bette*

*Cousin Bette* by Honoré de Balzac is a novel about a socially superior family and their poorer cousin who feels patronised and maligned by them. The eponymous cousin Bette consequently expends a malevolent, lago-like energy to bring about the ruin of her more colourful and wealthy relations. Bette works in tandem with a bitter and discontented young woman – Valérie Marneffe – in order to seduce and ruin the patriarch of the family, the aristocratic Baron Hector Hulot. As Bette and Valérie bleed the Baron dry, he loses both his fortune and name, and his family is decimated in the process. He is reduced to corruption in order to support Valérie’s avarice in her role as his mistress. Bette and Valérie, however, are able to triumph only because the Baron is presented as having a naive and flawed but essentially noble and generous nature. He is a lover of beauty. His aristocratic disposition disposes him to fine wine and women. But above all, he is unable to fathom the scheming and acquisitive natures of those whom fate has set into motion in order to work against him.

And in this respect, the conflict between Bette and brood is more generally a representation of the broader historical conflict which took place between the old world and the new. It is about the way in which the epoch of exchange value and capital expansion increasingly intrudes, in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, on the ‘patriarchal, idyllic relations’¹ which correspond to older feudal forms. It is about the ascension

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of the bourgeoisie and the manner in which that class tears ‘away from
the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a
mere money relation’. Balzac’s skill lies in the way in which he is able
to raise a whole world through words, to dissolve the boundary between
the history of an epoch and the history of a family, to allow the one to
flow into the other, to reveal world historic change as being inexorably
but indirectly bound up with individual destiny and to demonstrate this
with seamless and invisible artistry.

But *Cousin Bette* is also a problematic novel. It is, in places, poisoned by
the author’s contempt for society at large and bloated by senile, aristocratic predilection. In the first scene, we have the meeting between two
of the most important characters: the Baroness Adeline Fischer and the
nouveau riche entrepreneur Monsieur Crevel. Monsieur Crevel is a craven
stuffed shirt; he typifies the modern bourgeoisie in that he worships
money and understands accumulation to be an end in itself. Crevel’s
character is counterposed to the aristocrat of old, the Baron Hulot – a
figure that spends little time in the contemplation of wealth, seeing it as
nothing other than a means to an end, a way by which he might expedi
dite a life of adventure and pleasure.

When we first meet Crevel, he is propositioning the wife of the Baron,
for, like an astute businessperson, he has sniffed out economic despera
tion and is hoping to profit from it by compelling her to prostitute
herself. Crevel thinks in francs and devalues any existence which is
not devoted to the feverish pursuit of wealth. The vast sum of money
he has already managed to accrue is entirely precious because it is not
merely an external fact but is as well the physical embodiment and
ultimate measure of his being. It remains the memento of his successful
past and forms a bridge to a glorious future for – although Crevel is a
fundamentally unlikable, manipulative and pompous human being –
his money buys him associates, friends and even lovers; in its light, he
is transformed. One is reminded of the words of Shakespeare’s Timon of
Athens, who says of gold with bitter irony, ‘Thus much of this will make
black white, foul fair, / Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward
valiant.’

But Crevel also possesses that certain practical astuteness which
comes from being an effective accumulator. And he is able to sense,

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2 Ibid. 45.