

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

FRENCH LITERATURE – 20th Century

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20TH CENTURY

Overview A new idealism and positive faith, which permeated French thinking toward the end of the 19th century—powered by faith in science, economic progress, exuberant forms of nationalism—found expression in the vitalist philosophies of such pan European thinkers as Bergson and Nietzsche. However intimations of upcoming political strife, of ominous force, were on the horizon.

The boiling conflicts within Germany came to the surface as early as 1905, when the Kaiser insulted France at Tangiers; there was more friction at Agadir in 1911. Then in 1914, came the First World War, and with it the destruction not only of the German Empire but virtually of France along with it. The era between the first and second world wars was one of disillusionment, frustration, and cynicism. Conflicting economic and political beliefs made for instability in governments, and pacifism met opposition from those who feared the resurgence of German militarism, especially after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The pragmatic philosophy of William James and the psychology of Sigmund Freud had deep effect on French thought during this interim period.

Like the period following World War I, the years since the end of the last conflict, were filled with insecurity, disillusionment and fear—especially, in the United States, the fear of Russia and communism.

In literature, many of the fin de siècle writers continued to produce into the twentieth century. Naturalism and symbolism were already on the decline, but no new school of significance took their place. Many minor schools had brief vogues—neoromanticism, vitalism, Dynamism, Paroxysm, Futurism, and others. Several general tendencies, however, can be noted. First, during the early years of the century, the optimism, nationalism, patriotism, and activism of the era determined the course of much of the literature. At the same time some writers were turning to mysticism and religion. During each world war some good war literature was written, and after each conflict the literature reflected the pessimism and frustration of the nation. During the twentieth century there have been other persistent trends, all of them inflected by the ominous Cold War which separated the Soviet Union from the rest of Europe and the United States, and which remained a reality almost to the end of the century. One of the trends is an increasing interest in the inner workings of the mind—a trend opened widely by the researches of Sigmund Freud. Another trend might be considered the exacerbation of social and racial tension—as new nations are formed in Africa, as civil rights movements manifest in powerful societies, and as the classical threats of World War between nations are replaced by civil and ideological conflicts. A third trend should be the widening of global communications through the internet, which was an operative force by the late eighties, and the resultant changes, still hard to explore, in the relationships among individuals and the operations of entertainment and world news itself.

Discussion questions

What do you see as the roots of the Surrealism sponsored by Aragon and Breton? What needs of the time were being met by the development of this ideology and poetic?

Does the view of mankind, which Sartre develops in his plays and philosophy, resemble at all the view of Racine, in his tragedies, toward man and the human condition? Would Beckett concur with Sartre's vision of the human condition?

How does Malraux, in his *Psychology of Art*, describe the new world of international, intercultural art experience? Has the advent of the internet dated the perceptions central to Malraux?

Marcel Proust takes us back into the tangled moral complexities of an earlier social culture. How does Proust's view of that 'older world' compare to the view taken by Mauriac, in a dark novel like *The Nest of Vipers*?

How do you interpret the lengthy period of silence in which Paul Valéry found himself unable to write poetry, and then the outburst of fine lyric that later came from him? Was he, this mathematician of the imagination, moving through a mystical period?

Poetry

Aragon, Louis: importance for French literature. Louis Aragon (1897-1982) was born and died in Paris. He left a noteworthy mark on French literature. He, along with Andre Breton, was at the foundation of the literary movement of Surrealism. In addition he was a devoted member of the French Communist party, during the dramatic Cold War Years in which intellectuals in the West were defining themselves in terms of extraordinary new political ideologies.

Louis Aragon; Life and Works. Louis Aragon was born and died in Paris. The story of his upbringing is unparalleled in its complexity, and surely has a bearing on his work. Louis was raised by his mother and by his maternal grandmother. However—thanks to the manipulations of his mother and grandmother—he was convinced that these two women were, respectively, his sister and foster mother. His biological father, the senator Louis Andrieux, was thirty years older than his wife, and essentially refused to recognize Louis as his son. As a result, Louis was fobbed off as Louis's godfather. The truth of this entire ruse was revealed to Louis at age nineteen, but by then his father's refusal to recognize him had cut a deep wound, and Aragon lived his with this absence of an active father. Who can doubt that the backstory to his family tree played a role in the upside down syntax of poetry within Surrealism? From 1919 on, at the end of one all enveloping war, but at the start—as we would be forced to know—of a far worse, Aragon plunged into the center of his society, writing his poetry, joining fellow writers in the Dadaist movement (1919-1924), and from the early 20's on joining the Communist Party as a fellow-traveler. (It is for this wholehearted engagement with his time, that Aragon continues to fascinate us.) In 1924 Louis Aragon became a founding member of the Surrealist Movement, along with his colleagues Andre Breton and Phillipe Soupault. By the same year, 1924, he became a full member of the Communist Party, and began to work for the Communist newspaper, *L'Humanite*. In other words, Communism and Surrealism—two very different versions of status quo rebellion—coincided in the developing Aragon. From this point on, as he configured his world view, Aragon wrote fervently about the beliefs and styles he admired.

I demand that my books be judged with utmost severity, by knowledgeable people who know the rules of grammar and of logic, and who will seek beneath the footsteps of my commas the lice of my thought in the head of my style.

In other words, the refusal of bourgeois language went hand in hand, in Aragon, with his refusal of the bourgeois structure of society. His poetry on war, love, nature, and confidence in the future is memorable and assumes many forms, not simply the extreme surrealist form: his poems from the war years are collected in the volume *Aragon, Poet of the French Resistance* (1945). Even before that, though, he was known for his novels, among which the later attempt to portray the whole of French society. In other words Aragon is a flexible writer, deeply involved with own time and, like many writers, skilled at assuming contradictory guides in his expression.

Reading

Primary source reading

Paris Peasant, tr. Taylor, 2004.

Secondary source reading

Aragon: Poet of the Resistance, ed. Josephson and Cowley, 1945.

Further reading

Adereth, Max, *Elsa Triolet and Louis Aragon: An Introduction to their Interwoven Lives and Works*, 1994

Foreign language reading

Sanouillet, M. *Dada a Paris*, 1993.

Suggested paper topics

What relation do you see, between Aragon's complex and insecure childhood, and the kinds of surreal verbal projects from which he made his literature? Would you like to generalize about the psychological origins of surrealism in general?

As you reflect on Aragon's life and work, consider the relation between literary surrealism and communism. Can you see how they can coexist? Do they share certain common values and perspectives?

Excerpt http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/l/louis_aragon.html

We know that the nature of genius is to provide idiots with ideas twenty years later.

Light is meaningful only in relation to darkness, and truth presupposes error. It is these mingled opposites which people our life, which make it pungent, intoxicating. We only exist in terms of this conflict, in the zone where black and white clash.

I demand that my books be judged with utmost severity, by knowledgeable people who know the rules of grammar and of logic, and who will seek beneath the footsteps of my commas the lice of my thought in the head of my style.

Love is made by two people, in different kinds of solitude. It can be in a crowd, but in an oblivious crowd.

Fear of error which everything recalls to me at every moment of the flight of my ideas, this mania for control, makes men prefer reason's imagination to the imagination of the senses. And yet it is always the imagination alone which is at work.

O reason, reason, abstract phantom of the waking state, I had already expelled you from my dreams, now I have reached a point where those dreams are about to become fused with apparent realities: now there is only room here for myself.

There are strange flowers of reason to match each error of the senses.

Valéry, Paul

Paul Valéry: Life and Works, first half. Paul Valéry (1871-1945) was born in Sete, on the Mediterranean, and throughout his lifetime he would fixate on seascapes which derive from his early experience of the Mediterranean. Valéry's father was Corsican, and his mother Italian, and the young man was raised in Montpellier. In 1900 he married, and had three children, and settled into what, for nineteenth century French writers, was a stable married life. His academic route was through the University of Montpellier, where he also wrote extensively. After graduation he was working for over a decade as a private secretary, and writing for an appreciative public, for by this time, 1920 and after, he had begun to publish widely. His *Album des vers anciens* (1920), *Album of ancient verses*, revealed him as a poet of exquisite finesse in orthodox prosody; his *Charmes* (1922), which included one of his greatest poems, 'Le Cimetière Marin,' 'The Seaside Cemetery,' in which the hard frost of light on the ocean mirrors the hard deaths at sea which bedaub the rough Mediterranean coast. And then there was the *Soirée avec M. Teste* (1897), *The Evening with Mr. Teste*, which though prose had the hard intellectual abstractness of the poetry of Valéry, or of Valéry's master, Stéphane Mallarmé, and had already before Valéry's volumes of poetry drawn attention to his extraordinary imaginative intellect. In the course of these high profile engagements with the public, Valéry found himself becoming a popular and honored public figure. In 1925 he was inducted into the *Académie française*, and in that capacity began to contribute to public causes, to lecture widely throughout France, and in effect to serve as an unofficial voice of the government on public matters. Inspired by the support of the public, Valéry went on to become a tireless speaker and presence in higher French culture. Valéry founded a noteworthy College in Cannes, in 1932, a meeting place for the study and appreciation of French culture and values. The same Valéry gave the memorial lecture for the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Goethe. By this time, although he had published only some one hundred lyrics, he was widely viewed as the leader of the Symbolist movement, and as a worthy successor to his master, Stéphane Mallarmé.

Life and Works, Second Half. Oddly enough, there is a second half to all this. It is a half which begins before the first half, the public figure stage, ended. In 1892, in the aftermath of a violent thunderstorm, Valéry had an existential awareness which broke his will to write. (One might think of Jakob Boehme's vision of the inner meaning of the sunshine on a pewter bowl, in seventeenth century Germany.) As we have seen, Valéry had already written fine work by that time, but in the wake of this 'moment' he wrote nothing more for twenty years. (We have just seen how much else he accomplished, in public, but he could create no more 'literature.')

Encouraged by André Gide, and by now interested primarily in the sciences, he began writing afresh in 1916. This poetry is austere, mathematical. and pure, eliminating life in favor of an intellectualized geometry. (One can feel the constant presence of Mallarmé's poetry here.) This new poetry, with its conventions and mannerisms, leads to obscurity, but to a purity which has led some of his followers to consider his the best poetic work of the twentieth century. He was in this later period also prolific with brilliant aesthetic essays, and with notes on his time.

Reading

Primary source reading

Paul Valery's Cahiers/Notebooks, ed. Gifford, Stimpson, Pickering, 2000.

Secondary source reading

Baudry, Phillippe, *Valery Finder: Metaphysics and Literature*, 2011,

Further reading

Kristeva, J., *La Revolution du langage poétique*, 1974.

Original language reading

Cioran, Emile, *Valery face à ses idoles*, 2007.

Suggested paper topics

What practical interrelation do you see between Valery's scientific thought and his poetry? Does one enrich the other? What other writers do you know, for whom scientific study is important? Goethe? Zola?

How do you understand the moving experience which led to Valery's prolonged and silent absence from poetry? Was it a 'mystical experience'? Did he ever try to explain this experience?

Excerpt <http://www.historyguide.org/europe/valery.html>

We later civilizations . . . we too know that we are mortal.

We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished, of empires sunk without a trace, gone down with all their men and all their machines into the unexplorable depths of the centuries, with their gods and their laws, their academies and their sciences pure and applied, their grammars and their dictionaries, their Classics, their Romantics, and their Symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics. . . . We were aware that the visible earth is made of ashes, and that ashes signify something. Through the obscure depths of history we could make out the phantoms of great ships laden with riches and intellect; we could not count them. But the disasters that had sent them down were, after all, none of our affair.

Elam, Ninevah, Babylon were but beautiful vague names, and the total ruin of those worlds had as little significance for us as their very existence. But France, England, Russia...these too would be beautiful names. *Lusitania* too, is a beautiful name. And we see now that the abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life. The circumstances that could send the works of Keats and Baudelaire to join the works of Menander are no longer inconceivable; they are in the newspapers. That is not all. The searing lesson is more complete still. It was not enough for our generation to learn from its own experience how the most beautiful things and the most ancient, the most formidable and the best ordered, can perish *by accident*; in the realm of thought, feeling, and common sense, we witnessed extraordinary phenomena: paradox suddenly become fact, and obvious fact brutally believed.

I shall cite but one example: the great virtues of the German peoples have begotten more evils, than idleness ever bred vices. With our own eyes, we have seen conscientious labor, the most solid learning, the most serious discipline and application adapted to appalling ends.

So many horrors could not have been possible without so many virtues. Doubtless, much science was needed to kill so many, to waste so much property, annihilate so many cities in so short a time; but *moral qualities* in like number were also needed. Are Knowledge and Duty, then, suspect?

So the Persepolis of the spirit is no less ravaged than the Susa of material fact. Everything has not been lost, but everything has sensed that it might perish.

Breton, André

André Breton, Early Life. Andre Breton (1896-1966) was born in Normandy, of a working class family, a fact of importance for his subsequent solidarity with the working class through the mediation of the Communist party. As a young man he studied medicine and psychiatry, and took particular interest in mental illness and its symptoms. In WW I Breton worked in a neurological ward in Nantes. (It seems of note that while there Breton met a young man named Jacques Vache, whose natural rebelliousness and anarchism fascinated Andre, and helped accentuate what was to become Breton's mature life of resistance to middle class values. He took due note of the fact that Vache committed suicide at age twenty four.)

Breton, mature life and works. In 1921, Breton moved back to Paris, and set up his apartment on the rue Fontaine. He began there the assembling of a collection of artifacts, photographs, books, painting, objets d'art, which was to grow to 53,000 in number, and to grow into a vast resource for such as cultural anthropologists. (There was a strong emphasis, throughout the collection, on materials relating to the Native Indians of Northwest America.) At the same time, Breton was immersing himself in the drama of the current literary world in Paris. In 1919 Breton—along with two fellow writers, Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon—founded the journal *Littérature*, in which the group devoted much attention to the phenomenon of automatic writing, and its ways of letting the subconscious out into expression. (Breton was to make the acquaintance of Sigmund Freud, in 1920, and to remain true, throughout his writing life, to his desire to discover and display the meeting points between dream and ordinary language.) In 1924 Breton served as editor of a widely distributed Parisian journal, *Les recherches surréalistes (Surrealist investigations)*, as well as of the prominent *Manifesto of Surrealism*, to which many of the outstanding 'liberated poets of the day' contributed. In the *Manifesto* Breton makes evident what he foresees as the achievement of a new kind of person, through surrealism; one to whom the egalitarian social perspectives of Marxism are very congenial, who believes in the simple oneness of humanity, and who at the same time is devoted to the personal transformation of the individual, as it can be roadmapped in the work of a brilliant forbear like Rimbaud. It should be noted that Breton joined and remained in the Communist Party from 1927-33; maintaining to the Party the same kind of complex fidelity that shows in his colleague Louis Aragon and in many contemporary French intellectuals. (In 1938 Breton met Trotsky in Mexico, and was inspired by some social prospects from within a revised Communism.) For these thinkers, as for many throughout Western Europe and the United States in the 1930's and 40's, Communism seemed to offer a practical platform for a new organization of human society.

Breton in later life. In 1940 Breton once again served in the Medical Corps of the French Army, but as he came under pursuit by the Vichy government—his Communism sufficed for that—he staged (with two American friends) a necessary escape from Europe. He located both in the United States, and in the Caribbean, where he made the acquaintance of Aime Césaire. In New York City he met his third wife; he also shared his valuable personal art collection in an extraordinary exhibit at Yale University in 1942. In 1948 he returned to Paris, where he committed himself to new movements of Anarchism, and denounced French colonial occupation in Algeria. True to himself, he remained outside the system, right to his death.

Reading

Primary source reading

Nadja, tr. Richard Howard, 1994.

Secondary source reading

Raymond, Marcel, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, 1957.

Further reading

Broome and Chesters, *Anthology of Modern French Poetry, 1850-1950*, 1976.

Original language reading

Cauvin, Caws, *Poems of Andre Breton: A Bilingual Anthology*, 2006.

Suggested paper topics

How do you relate Breton's poetry to his extensive career collecting primitive works of art? Was he an anthropologist/collector in his writing?

Does Andre Breton's experience in mental wards, and his knowledge of neurology, play a role in his finding of his poetic powers? How does Communism belong to this mix of poetry and science? Is Breton a lover of the people?

Excerpt <http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>

So strong is the belief in life, in what is most fragile in life – *real* life, I mean – that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work, at least he has not refused to try his luck (or what he calls his luck!). At this point he feels extremely modest: he knows what women he has had, what silly affairs he has been involved in; he is unimpressed by his wealth or his poverty, in this respect he is still a newborn babe and, as for the approval of his conscience, I confess that he does very nicely without it. If he still retains a certain lucidity, all he can do is turn back toward his childhood which, however his guides and mentors may have botched it, still strikes him as somehow charming. There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting, the extreme facility of everything. Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep.

But it is true that we would not dare venture so far, it is not merely a question of distance. Threat is piled upon threat, one yields, abandons a portion of the terrain to be conquered. This imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility; it is incapable of assuming this inferior role for very long and, in the vicinity of the twentieth year, generally prefers to abandon man to his lusterless fate.

Though he may later try to pull himself together on occasion, having felt that he is losing by slow degrees all reason for living, incapable as he has become of being able to rise to some exceptional situation such as love, he will hardly succeed. This is because he henceforth belongs body and soul to an imperative practical necessity which demands his constant attention. None of his gestures will be expansive, none of his ideas generous or far-reaching. In his mind's eye, events real or imagined will be seen only as they relate to a welter of similar events, events in which he has not participated, *abortive* events. What am I saying: he will judge them in relationship to one of these events whose consequences are more reassuring than the others. On no account will he view them as his salvation.

Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.

There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another.... We all know, in fact, that the insane owe their incarceration to a tiny number of legally reprehensible acts and that, were it not for these acts their freedom (or what we see as their freedom) would not be threatened. I am willing to admit that they are, to some degree, victims of their imagination, in that it induces them not to pay attention to certain rules – outside of which the species feels threatened – which we are all supposed to know and respect.

Drama

Beckett, Samuel

Samuel Beckett: the imprint on his world. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish novelist, poet, theater director, and commentator on the meaning of life, who left a deep mark on writing and thinking in English. He has been considered the last great master of Modernism, the greatest proponent of the so called Theater of the Absurd, and even one of the first of the Postmoderns. In other words a major literary figure at the crossroads of many of the artistic frontiers of his and our time.

Samuel Beckett, school and study. Samuel Beckett was born on Good Friday into a comfortable Dublin suburb. (His parents were devout members of the Anglican Church of Ireland.) His house, with its grounds and tennis court, gave the young Samuel a congenial venue for long walks with his father, as did the surrounding parks and roadways, which were green and inviting. His father was a surveyor, and in good relation with his son; there is little, in Beckett's childhood, to suggest the formation of a world class cynic and gallows humorist. He was educated first at a local playschool, then at Portora Royal School—where Oscar Wilde had also matriculated—and where Samuel began his serious career as an amateur cricketer. He was to become an outstanding player when he went up to Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a student from 1923-1927, and where he acquired the formal underpinnings of his linguistic genius. At Trinity he studied French, Italian, and English literatures and language, working under such luminaries as A.B. Luce the distinguished student of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy.

Maturity and mature works. Upon graduation from Trinity, Dublin, Beckett was invited to work as a teacher of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He was to remain in that city for much of his life, with occasional forays around the continent and home to Ireland. One important factor in his prolonged French residence was his early acquaintance, in Paris, with James Joyce, another transplanted Irishman. Upon arrival in Paris, Beckett had met the older man, and become his private secretary, doing research for *Finnegans Wake*. From the start this relation had been the great literary inspiration of Beckett's life, although he was later to discover that his own genius lay in a direction opposite to Joyce's, in the direction of contraction and simplification of language, rather than of exuberant and erudite growth. Language play and daring joined the two men, as they constructed very different kinds of verbal universe. (Their bond was threatened when Joyce's daughter, who was passing into schizophrenia, made advances to Beckett; the latter withdrew, bruising many feelings.) Beckett, meanwhile, was embedding himself in French culture, starting to write and publish actively in French—which was to remain his first language for writing, throughout his life—and participating actively in the French Resistance against German occupation. (Beckett fought throughout the war, served the French with high honors, and was rewarded at war's end with the French Croix de Guerre.) By this stage, Beckett was coming into mastery of his own minimalist, gallows humor drama. Starting with *En Attendant Godot* (1953), *Waiting for Godot*, he wrote a series of dark dramas which attained immediate success both in Europe and the United States. *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Fin de Partie* (1957), (*Endgame*), deserve mention, among others. These plays faced human beings with the bleakness of themselves, of their histories and prospects, and with the looming meaningless of the universe. Human beings flocked to the theater, to hear this about themselves.

Reading

Primary source reading

Waiting for Godot, tr. Beckett, 2011.

Secondary source reading

Esslin, M., *The Theater of the Absurd*, 1969.

Further reading

Ricks, Christopher, *Beckett's Dying Words*, 1995.

Original language reading

Kamyabi Mask, A., *Les temps de l'attente*, 1999.

Suggested paper topics

What seems to you, upon looking into it, to have been the major influence of James Joyce on Beckett? Did Beckett not write as a minimalist, while Joyce expanded his text to the limits of the world? Was the bond between the two men their common sense of language, or was it their view of the world?

Does Samuel Beckett belong in our French writers' syllabus? He did, after all, write a lot in English, and translate some of his own French work into English. Is his inclusion here owing to the special value of the work he did in his writing in French? Or, amazing possibility, did he come to write French better than English?

Excerpt www.english-literature.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teaching/.../Sur-20c-read.do

A country road. A tree. Evening.

Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.

As before. Enter Vladimir.

ESTRAGON:

(giving up again). Nothing to be done.

VLADIMIR:

(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart). I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)* So there you are again.

ESTRAGON:

Am I?

VLADIMIR:

I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever.

ESTRAGON:

Me too.

VLADIMIR:

Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you.

ESTRAGON:

(irritably). Not now, not now.

VLADIMIR:

(hurt, coldly). May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

ESTRAGON:

In a ditch.

VLADIMIR:

(admiringly). A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON:

(without gesture). Over there.

VLADIMIR:

And they didn't beat you?

ESTRAGON:

Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR:

The same lot as usual?

ESTRAGON:

The same? I don't know.

VLADIMIR:

When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be . . . *(Decisively.)* You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.

ESTRAGON:

And what of it?

Fiction

Gide, André

André Gide, his importance. André Gide (1869 -1951) was a French novelist, autobiographer, social commentator, and a dramatic experimenter out at the limits of ethical behavior. He was one of the most influential of modern French novelists.

André Gide, the Life. Gide was born in Paris of a middle class Protestant family, which had recently converted to Catholicism; indication, right in the family, of the kind of religious querying that would be part of Gide's own temperament. His father was a Professor of Law in Paris; he died in 1880. Young Andre was sent to the Ecole Alsacienne for his education, but due to frequent severe illness he often found himself taken to the south of France, for more benign weather. (In 1895 he met Oscar Wilde in Algeria; the two discussed homosexuality, to which Gide was become increasingly drawn, though not yet publicly. Wilde later claimed, probably wrongly, to have had an effect on Gide's turn to the homosexual. In that regard, to note that Gide's novel, *Les nourritures terrestres*, 1897, *Terrestrial nourishment*, concerns a young man's recovery from a near fatal disease, to find himself in love with this world, first of all with its sensual pleasures.) Gide began early to make fiction from his creative mind, that of a lover of the south and the senses, who was however brought up in a strictly moral religious environment, and who was destined to live the resultant conflict all his life. He published his first novel when he was twenty one, then married his cousin—the marriage was not consummated—then from 1901-1907 he rented a home on an island near the Isle of Jersey, where he looked for peace, and gave some thought to the direction of his life. In 1908 Gide became one of the founders of the influential *Nouvelle revue française*; while at the same time he fled to London with his fifteen year old lover, with whom he would later travel to Central Africa. (During his absence in London his wife burned all of Gide's correspondence, which he considered the most important part of his life.)

The crux of Gide's works. Andre Gide was prolific. His *Notebooks* and journals, which cover the period of 1889-1949, document his daily life, the life of Paris and his country, and the evolution of his values and views on the place of man in society. There is no more intense record of the character of modern life in our times. Gide's novels and travel memoirs reinforce the insights of his *Notebooks*. His *Voyage au Congo* (1927) recounts a boat trip up the Congo River with his young lover, and their encounters with Colonialism in action. Gide returns from the trip with insights, into the French colonial economic exploitation of the Central African Republic, and creates in this text one of his many persuasive documents protesting Colonial policy. The same critical social insights, which were pervasive throughout Gide's journals, percolate through the various texts in which he records his relationship with Communism. One of those texts is the *Return from the USSR* (1936) in which he recalls and then recants his former positions as a fellow traveler. The moral questions raised by these radical new political horizons, like Communism, are the same ones he presents to himself in a masterly novel like *La Porte Etroite* (1909), *Straight is the Gate*, which probes the question of moral fidelity and salvation—which was always of interest to Gide, the inheritor of a profoundly religious family tradition.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Immoralist, tr. Howard, 1996.

Secondary source reading

Sheridan, Alan, *Andre Gide: A Life in the Present*, 1999.

Further reading

Best, Victoria, *An Introduction to Twentieth Century French Literature*, 2002.

Original language reading

Felman, Shoshana, *La Folie et la chose littéraire*, 1978.

Suggested paper topics

Look into Gide's *Journals*, which provide a view into his thinking and feeling throughout his writing career. Does his private and personal life play a large role in his fiction and drama? Do themes like moral strictness, anti-colonialism, homosexuality bleed from his private life into his written work?

In the large sense, does Gide seem to you a Humanist, who is willing to live without God but believes that mankind will prevail? Or is the religious querying, which we experienced in his childhood, a preoccupation with him, even into morally 'open' middle years? Is there a complexity, to his blend of license with Calvinism, which adds a special interest to his work?

Excerpt <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/480721-l-immoraliste>

"Envy another man's happiness is madness; you wouldn't know what to do with it if you had it."

"You have to let other people be right' was his answer to their insults. 'It consoles them for not being anything else.'"

"What would a narrative of happiness be like? All that can be described is what prepares it, and then what destroys it."

"A man thinks he owns things, and it is he who is owned"

"Yet I'm sure there's something more to be read in a man. People dare not -- they dare not turn the page. The laws of mimicry -- I call them the laws of fear. People are afraid to find themselves alone, and don't find themselves at all. I hate this moral agoraphobia -- it's the worst kind of cowardice. You can't create something without being alone. But who's trying to create here? What seems different in yourself: that's the one rare thing you possess, the one thing which gives each of us his worth; and that's just what we try to suppress. We imitate. And we claim to love life."

"The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free is the task."

"The loveliest creations of men are persistently painful. What would be the description of happiness?"

"They establish distinctions and reserves which I cannot apply to myself, for I exist only as a whole; my only claim is to be natural, and the pleasure I feel in an action, I take as a sign that I ought to do it."

Proust, Marcel

Marcel Proust: The Life. Marcel Proust (1871-1922) was born in Auteuil, at that time a quite rustic region of the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris. His father was a prominent physician and epidemiological researcher, who had contributed greatly to the fight against cholera in his time. His mother came from a well placed Jewish family in Alsace. (Marcel was baptized and brought up in the Catholic faith, but never practiced it.) The young Proust was born during the last two months of the Franco Prussian War, during the brutal suppression of the French Commune; an era which can be taken to mark the moment of decline of the French aristocracy, and the significant development of the new Middle Class. Marcel was hypersensitive to these surrounding events, which may well have contributed to the rapid development of his chronic asthma, and already in his teens was writing about his social and political world, work that would eventuate in his *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1896), *Pleasures and the Day*, and his first real novel, *Jean Santeuil*, which he would later abandon, in 1899—and which would not be published until 1952. Meanwhile he was enriching his voracious interest in the upper class social milieux of Paris, profiting from several contacts he had made among the fading nobility, during his school days at the Lycée Condorcet and at University. He was also interacting increasingly with the debilitating asthmatic condition that would do much to shape his later life

Marcel Proust, the mature works. The social scene presented by the decline of the aristocracy, the growth of the middle class, and new money in the economy was of intense interest to Proust, from childhood on. (He was intimately fond of his mother, and through her of the world of finer sentiments, complex social ramifications, and emotional experimentation.) In other words this was the transition point of society that was to fascinate Marcel Proust throughout his life, and to form the material of the huge series of seven novels which was the fruit of his writing life, a life which saw little activity, but much reading, no marriage, a closeted homosexuality. Proust himself was fully prepared for this work; highly educated at the Lycée Condorcet, from early on a social climber with a fascination for the declining aristocracy, and with a suitable private income. He was able to devote his life attention to the sequence of novels making up *In Search of Times Past* (1913-1921), arguably the most powerful work of literary Modernism.

The gist of Proust's major work. *In Search of Times Past, A la recherche du temps perdu*, has as its theme the moral decadence of French society and the obliteration of class distinctions. Three strata of society are shown: the aristocracy (the Guermantes family), the bourgeoisie (Swann and his coterie), and the nouveaux riches (the Verdurin family). These strata, all interlinked by marriage, are blended in the novels by the presence of Marcel, the author and narrating persona of the novels, who moves from one scene to another. Worth noting: considerable portions of the novel are devoted to Marcel's love affairs, and his tastes in painting, music, and literature. The consequence of this narrative material and structure, is that Proust's novel is wide ranging, includes a vast material of testimony to his own age and its political/social condition, and is loose in construction. Many readers complain that the whole of this seven part fabric is too loose (and decadent) to keep their attention; others, and there are many, proclaim Proust the greatest novelist of all time.

Reading

Primary source reading

In Search of Lost Time, tr. Enright, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Green, F. C., *The Mind of Proust*, 1949.

Further reading

Deleuze, Gilles, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, 2004.

Original language reading

Chardin, Phillipe, *Proust ou le Bonheur du petit personnage qui compare*, 2004.

Suggested paper topics

Compare Marcel Proust, as an analyst of society, with, say, Emile Zola or the Goncourt brothers. Has Proust, like the others, any interest in making a scientific survey of the society (even the upper class society) of his time? Or does he simply look for interesting studies and situations, to feed his narrative?

Certain great French novelists write in a style, and in a narrative structure, which their critics have called loose, not sharply focused. (Flaubert, for instance, scorns Balzac's style.) What do you think of the huge range of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*? Does it hold together? Does it keep making points? Does it hold your interest?

Excerpt <http://www.fisheaters.com/proust.html>

I feel that there is much to be said for the Celtic belief that the souls of those whom we have lost are held captive in some inferior being, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate object, and so effectively lost to us until the day (which to many never comes) when we happen to pass by the tree or to obtain possession of the object which forms their prison. Then they start and tremble, they call us by our name, and as soon as we have recognised their voice the spell is broken. We have delivered them: they have overcome death and return to share our life.

And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die.

Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, as I came home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind. She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate, a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory--this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? How could I seize upon and define it?

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself. The tea has called up in me, but does not itself understand, and can only repeat indefinitely with a gradual loss of strength, the same testimony; which I, too, cannot interpret, though I hope at least to be able to call upon the tea for it again and to find it there presently, intact and at my disposal, for my final enlightenment. I put down my cup and examine my own mind. It is for it to discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.

Mauriac, Francois

Francois Mauriac, the importance. Francois Mauriac (1885-1970) was a French novelist, essay writer, journalist, and defender of the Catholic Church, who lived through and recorded almost a century of change in French culture and society. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for fiction in 1952.

Francois Mauriac, the life and writings. Francois Mauriac was born in Bordeaux. His father was an upper middle class banker, who died when Francois was eighteen months old. That death left Francois' mother with five children, of whom Francois was the youngest. The atmosphere in the family of youngsters appears to have been exceptionally protective, and for Francois the protective mode was sustained when he went off to school with the Marianist sisters. In 1905 Francois went to the University of Bordeaux, where he studied literature, then moved to Paris, in preparation for study at the prestigious Ecole des Chartes. Instead of continuing with advanced research, however, Mauriac decided to throw in his lot with writing, and achieved his first limited attention with the publication of *Les Mains Jointes* (1909), *Joined Hands*, a volume of poetry. A novel, *Le Baiser aux Lépreux* (1922), *The Lepers' Kiss*, drew further attention to Mauriac's accomplishment. Later fictional work was to establish Mauriac as a major national figure; especially through *Le Désert de l'Amour* (1925), *The Desert of Love*, and *Le Noeud de Vipères* (1932), *The Nest of Vipers*. (It was on the basis of such works that Mauriac was elected to the *Académie française* (1933), awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952, and in 1958 awarded the Grand Croix of the Légion d'honneur.

Mauriac as Public Figure. Nor was it only through these writings that Mauriac was becoming a culture shaping figure in post War France. He was involved in a couple of high profile debates, which concerned issues of burning importance to French consciousness of the time. One of these debates was between Mauriac and the celebrated Resistance figure and novelist, Albert Camus. This debate, which was carried on in the press, Mauriac writing in *Le Figaro*, Camus in the newspaper *Combat*, concerned the policy of the French government, in post War time, toward former French Nazi collaborators or sympathizers—or at the extreme simply of those who went about their business under the Occupation, without protesting. (It was Mauriac's conviction that a complete purge was impossible and impractical, and that one should learn to live in a compromised and healing society.) A second equally conspicuous debate was carried on between Mauriac and Roger Peyrefitte; and like the earlier debate was carried on publically in the press. Peyrefitte, an aggressive critic of the Vatican, made serious allegations against that institution in a popular book of 1953. Mauriac, whose roots and practice were Catholic, took up arms for the Church, and defended her in the pages of *L'Express*. Nor was this the last public intervention of his career, for in the spirit of many French intellectuals—Valéry, Sartre, Camus—Mauriac felt called on to adopt an active position toward the central events of the day. He was, for example, to write fiercely against French interventions in Viet Nam, and French torture in Algeria.

The religious tone in Mauriac. Mauriac is customarily thought of as a Catholic writer but, like his fellow Catholic Graham Greene, in England, he brings out the religious thematic through a portrait of the dark sides of life. In *The Desert of Love* he portrays a wasting love triangle among a woman, her father, and her son. In *The Nest of Vipers* he lets an aging and bitter man, who has great insight into human failure, write a corrosive letter in which the rottenness of their family is rather inspiring given prominence.

Reading

Primary source reading

Therese Desqueyroux, tr. M. and R. MacKenzie, 2006.

Secondary source reading

Sowerwine, Charles, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics, and Society*, 2001.

Further reading

God and Mammon and What was Lost, tr. MacKenzie, 2003.

Original language reading

Mauriac, Francois, De Gaulle, 1964.

Suggested paper topics

Do you see a bond between Mauriac's public journalist life, with the high profile issues in which he engaged, and the themes of his fiction? Reflect on that relation in terms of *The Nest of Vipers*, which at first glance appears a darkly psychological text.

Does Mauriac seem to you to be a 'Catholic' writer? What role do 'Catholic' themes play in his writing? What 'Catholic' stances did he adopt as a public figure?

Excerpt

Excerpt <http://www.wf-f.org/02-1-Mauriac.html>

After the short Vespers of Holy Thursday, the officiating priests strip the altar of all ornaments and recite meanwhile the twenty-first* Psalm with the choir. It is the Psalm of which the first verse was cried out by the dying Christ: "O God, my God...why hast Thou forsaken me"?

The evangelists did not falter before this apparent acknowledgement of defeat, and no doubt it was necessary that the chalice be drunk to the dregs, even to this total abandonment. At that minute, nothing but vanquished humanity appeared any longer in Christ.

How could the Son of God have believed Himself to be forsaken? Had He not known and accepted His martyrdom beforehand? He knew it, without doubt, and He also knew that everything that was happening in that moment had been prophesied in that very twenty-first Psalm, the first verse of which He was crying out to His Father.

None of the scribes, who at the foot of the Cross were shaking their heads and scoffing at the dying victim, thought of drawing a parallel between the desperate appeal which opens this Psalm and what follows: "All they that saw me have laughed me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips and wagged the head. He hoped in the Lord, let him deliver him: let Him save him, seeing He delighteth in him".

But then was it not precisely the same mockery which the chief priests and rulers had just used against Jesus crucified? Were they not laughing at Him because, having saved others, He could not save Himself? Were they not challenging Him to come down from the Cross because He said He was the Son of God?

But, above all, they who knew the Scriptures should have remembered verses seventeen through nineteen, which were being confirmed at that very moment in an astonishing manner: "They have pierced my hands and feet. They have numbered all my bones. They parted my garments amongst them and upon my vesture they cast lots."

And this twenty-first Psalm, which begins with a cry of doubt and distress, ends with the promise of a triumph that the Crucified alone was to achieve. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and shall be converted to the Lord: and all the kindred of the Gentiles shall adore in His sight. For the Kingdom is the Lord's; and He shall have dominion over the nations."

Malraux, André

André Malraux: his importance for French culture. Andre Malraux (1901-1976) was a French novelist, art theorist, and public cultural figure who was of great influence on the social policy and creative thinking of mid twentieth century France.

André Malraux: the life. André Malraux was born in Paris in 1901. His parents separated when he was four years old, and divorced soon after; Andre was raised largely by three women—his mother, his maternal aunt, and his maternal grandmother, who had a small grocery store in a nearby village. (His father, who was a stockbroker, committed suicide in 1930, having lost all at the beginning of the Great Depression.) One result of this not completely stable childhood has been suggested (but is not certain); that Andre developed a case of nervous tics, bordering on Tourette's syndrome. It is certain that while the young man did not pursue a regular course of education, he was a voracious reader, and an intense visitor to the many glorious museums of Paris. In 1922 Malraux married for the first time, and had one daughter. Divorce followed. For some time, then, he lived with the novelist Josette Clotie, with whom he had two children; wife and children all died in accidents. For the remainder of his life Malraux lived in loving but unmarried relations. Throughout these years he was also engaged with the literary milieu of Paris, making friends with many of the formative cultural creators of the moment: Jean Cocteau, Francois Mauriac, Max Jacob. In 1923 he made a trip to Cambodia, with the intention of buying *objets d'art* from Khmer temples, and selling them to art collectors in the West; however he was arrested by the French on leaving the country, and had to surrender what he had collected. By this time, however, Malraux had begun to draw public attention with his writing. In the thirties and forties he was to publish his best known works—*La Condition Humaine* (1933), *Man's Fate*; *The Psychology of Art* (1947-1949)—and to begin to occupy an important public cultural function on the French scene. Already in the thirties Malraux was politically active, supporting the Republicans in Spain, the anti-Fascist Popular Front in France, and, during the Resistance, fighting courageously against the Occupation—an effort for which he received the Croix de Guerre. For his many patriotic efforts Malraux was significantly honored by President Charles de Gaulle. Malraux was made Minister of Information in 1945-46, and was appointed as the first Minister of Cultural Affairs, from 1959-69.

André Malraux: the work. Malraux's greatest novel, *Man's Fate*, deals with four fascinating and diverse characters caught up in a (failed) Communist rebellion in Shanghai, against the Chinese government of Chiang kai Shek. The interplay of vivid, risk taking, existentially diverse figures brings to a clarity Malraux's intense experience of the bruisingly international culture of his time. Malraux's *Psychology of Art* (1947-49) is only one of his many profound inquiries into the new aesthetics of his time. In the separately published first part of this work, entitled *Museums without Walls*, Malraux addressed the transtemporal, transcultural character of the global art scene, as it displays itself in the new art gallery of the later twentieth century. The new art world, Malraux points out—and actualizes in his distribution of support for Paris museums—is open to works of any kind from any culture, and takes particular interest in non western works, which force the West to reflect on itself.

Reading

Primary source reading

Man's Fate, tr. M. and H. Chevalier, 1990.

Secondary source reading

Alan, Derek, *Art and the Human Adventure: Andre Malraux' Theory of Art*, 2009.

Further reading

Cate, Curtis, *Andre Malraux: A Biography*, 1997.

Original language reading

Aubert, Raphael, *Malraux ou la lutte avec l'ange*, 2001.

Suggested paper topics

Malraux was perhaps the most officially important of the writers of 20th century France. Review the public contributions of Malraux' contemporary French writers. Is there in France of the last century a pronounced emphasis on the public role of the major literary figure?

Does Malraux' a major *Psychology of Art* reflect his international travels, and his active globalism? As a Minister of Culture he was faced with issues of support and development for France's museums. How did Malraux respond to that challenge?

Excerpt http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Malraux

No one can endure his own solitude.

The human mind invents its Puss-in-Boots and its coaches that change into pumpkins at midnight because neither the believer nor the atheist is completely satisfied with appearances.

What is man? A miserable little pile of secrets.

Our civilization ... is not devaluing its awareness of the unknowable; nor is it deifying it. It is the first civilization that has severed it from religion and superstition. In order to question it.

Chanel, General De Gaulle and Picasso are the three most important figures of our time.

The artist is not the transcriber of the world, he is its rival.

On this earth of ours where everything is subject to the passing of time, one thing only is both subject to time and yet victorious over it: the work of art.

If a man is not ready to risk his life, where is his dignity?

The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that from our very prison we should draw, from our own selves, images powerful enough to deny our own nothingness.

The attempt to force human beings to despise themselves... is what I call hell.

"Why do you fight?" ... He kept his wife, his kid, from dying. That was nothing. Less than nothing. If he had had money, if he could have left it to them, he would have been free to go and get killed. As if the universe had not treated him all his life with kicks in the belly, it now despoiled him of the only dignity he could ever possess — his death.

The sons of torture victims make good terrorists.

One cannot create an art that speaks to me when one has nothing to say.

There are not fifty ways of fighting, there is only one, and that is to win. Neither revolution nor war consists in doing what one pleases.

Sartre, Jean Paul

Jean Paul Sartre, his influence and importance. Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was a French novelist, playwright, theater director, literary critic, and public activist. He exercised great influence on younger writers, and, through his very popular plays, on a wide sector of the French public.

Jean Paul Sartre, the Life. Sartre was born in Paris, son of an officer in the French navy. (His father died of a fever two years after Jean Paul's birth, and the young man was turned over to his mother's care. When Sartre was twelve years old his mother remarried, and moved to La Rochelle. (His mother's new marriage was to a cousin of the Nobel Laureate Albert Schweitzer.) Young Sartre, an avid but quirky reader, went on to study at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the premier center for philosophical thought in France. (The great inspiration for Sartre, and what led him into philosophy, was the thought of Henri Bergson, about the nature of time.) At the Ecole Normale Sartre formed a lasting, if volatile, relationship with the eminent political philosopher to be, Raymond Aron; Sartre also perfected his gifts for pranks, on several occasions fooling the administration of the ENS into imagining impending disasters, against which they needed to protect themselves immediately. Subsequently he taught in Laon and Le Havre and then studied in Berlin. In France he became a professor at the Lycée Pasteur in Neuilly. In 1929 he met the woman who was to be his lifetime companion, Simone de Beauvoir. By 1946, at which time he founded the revue *Les Temps Modernes*, he had almost completely left teaching for journalism. He had begun writing full time. He had behind him the experience of having been arrested by the Gestapo, during the Occupation, and held for over a year, during which time he was able to read all of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and to take many steps toward his own version of Existentialism.

Sartre's Works. Jean Paul Sartre was a prolific writer, who wrote in many genres. Arguably his most compelling novel is his first, *La Nausee*, *Nausea*, published in 1938. Returned after years of traveling to his home town of Bouville—which resembles the Le Havre where Sartre taught—Antoine Roquentin settles down to write a biography of an eighteenth century French gentleman. As time goes by, and he pursues his daily scholarly routine, Roquentin becomes growingly aware of the natural world around him. On one famous occasion he finds himself facing the roots of a gnarled tree in the park. He feels threatened by the inhuman knot of roots, then, in looking for a word to protect himself with, for *racines*, he finds he is on the other side of language, and this occasion becomes a revelation, to him, of the human unfriendly character of nature. That is not all he realizes. At the same time he makes this discovery about the roots he realizes that man is on his own, unsupported by nature or by anything other than his own will; this is essentially the foundation of existentialism, which Sartre will write out through all his major works, in the following years. The basic premises active in this novel will pervade Sartre's ambitious: *L'Être et le néant*, 1943, *Being and Nothingness*, in which he lays out his philosophy formally.

Reading

Primary source reading

Existentialism is a Humanism, tr. Carol Macomber, 2007.

Secondary source reading

Hayman, Ronald, *Sartre: A Life*, 1987.

Further reading

Aronson, Ronald, *Camus and Sartre*, 2004.

Original language reading

Wittman, H., *L'esthétique de Sartre*, 2001.

Suggested paper topics

Look into the early relation of Sartre to his intellectual hero, Henri Bergson. What attracted Sartre to Bergson notions of time? Does Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, or his *Nausea*, reflect an ongoing preoccupation with the nature of time? Was the later influence of Martin Heidegger important for this same relationship?

Look into Sartre's drama and short fiction. Some think he is at his finest in those genres, where the inherent ambiguity of human existence is at its sharpest, as is the need to choose. Does Sartre's philosophy, in the formal sense, interface effectively with his fictions?

Excerpt <http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/nausea.htm>

6.00 p.m.

I can't say I feel relieved or satisfied; just the opposite, I am crushed. Only my goal is reached: I know what I wanted to know; I have understood all that has happened to me since January. The Nausea has not left me and I don't believe it will leave me so soon; but I no longer have to bear it, it is no longer an illness or a passing fit: it is I.

So I was in the park just now. The roots of the chestnut tree were sunk in the ground just under my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root any more. The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping forward, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty mass, entirely beastly, which frightened me. Then I had this vision. It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of "existence." I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, "The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an "existing seagull"; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. When I believed I was thinking about it, I must believe that I was thinking nothing, my head was empty, or there was just one word in my head, the word "to be." Or else I was thinking . . . how can I explain it? I was thinking of *belonging*, I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness. I kept myself from making the slightest movement, but I didn't need to move in order to see, behind the trees, the blue columns and the lamp posts of the bandstand and the Velleda, in the midst of a mountain of laurel. All these objects . . . how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odour.

Camus, Albert

Albert Camus, importance and influence. Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French novelist, essayist, prominent political activist, and journalist. Through his own clear sighted and flexible responses to war and inequality, he made himself an internationally respected voice of contemporary thought. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957.

Albert Camus, the life. Albert Camus was born in French Algeria and died before the outbreak of the great conflict between France and Algeria, in which Algeria would break from her colonizer. His parents were *pieds noirs*, that is French colonial settlers who had remained to colonized country. His mother was of Spanish extraction, and was half deaf, His father was a very poor agricultural worker, who was killed at the Battle of the Marne, in WW I. Albert was educated at the University of Algiers, where he was an excellent goalkeeper for the University football team. He earned his baccalaureat degree in 1935, then went on to advanced studies. (He wrote his Master's dissertation on the ancient Greek philosopher Plotinus, and the relation of his thought to early Christianity.) Further educated both in Algeria and France, Camus' deep involvement with Parisian culture began with his activist engagement in the French Resistance, during WWII. Already he had been deeply involved in public journalism, forming a group to combat the malign effects of technology. In 1933 he joined the Communist Party, but was soon booted out by Moscow, when he switched part of his allegiance to the Algerian Communist Party. During this period, when Resistance struggles and Communist intervention were swirling over France, Camus founded the journal, *Combat*, which was devoted to the Free French cause, but in the subsequent years he eventually broke from forms of Communism, as he discovered the tyrannical side of a movement initially intended to liberate the people. (That break with Communism was also Camus' break with his close friend and 'study partner' Jean-Paul Sartre, who felt Camus 'had gone soft.') Camus waged a lifelong battle on behalf of human individuality, and a lifelong quest for the meaning of life in what often seemed an absurd world. The Nobel Prize was awarded to him for his clear sightedness in analyzing the complex problems of his time. On only point, perhaps, did he sustain an unvarying determination.. He was an ardent and lifelong opponent of capital punishment.

The work of Albert Camus. As a journalist, Camus was from early in life active at the forefront of opinion making and political argument. The clear lines of his thought are evident in his most effective writing. *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*, 1942) This powerful novel attests to Camus' abilities as a master of controlled art, and deliberately simple narration. *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947), a novel, is Camus' most anti-Christian work. It dwells on the injustice of Christianity, evidenced by the sacrifice of the innocents, as exemplified by the death of child victims of the plague. The chronicle testified to the violence and injustice imposed on the city of Oran, and to the belief that in times of tribulation man reveals more admirable than despicable traits. It is marked by constant understatement in descriptive style, the precise use of administrative terms and official language, the deliberate banality of words, and the use of irony to bring out the whole horror of a situation.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Stranger, tr. M. Ward, 1989.

Secondary source reading

Todd, Olivier, *Albert Camus: A Life*, 1997.

Further reading

Mumma, Howard, *Albert Camus and the Mind*, 2000.

Original language reading

Salas, Denis, *Albert Camus, la juste révolte*, 2002.

Suggested paper topics

One of Camus' lasting concerns was with the issue of capital punishment, which he considered nothing better than state sponsored murder. How does that viewpoint play out in Camus' writing, fictional and critical. Remember that Sartre believed Camus had 'gone soft,' when he backed out on Communism.

Although Camus is a lasting friend to human solidarity, and people's mutual fidelity, his perhaps finest novel, *The Stranger*, concerns a person who is essentially alien to human concerns. Is that character, Meursault, created by Camus for our admiration? Or our amazement?

Excerpt <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3324245-la-chute>

You know what charm is: a way of getting the answer yes without having asked any clear question."

"I used to advertise my loyalty and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray."

"People hasten to judge in order not to be judged themselves."

"Men are never convinced of your reasons, of your sincerity, of the seriousness of your sufferings, except by your death. So long as you are alive, your case is doubtful; you have a right only to their skepticism."

"Friendship is less simple. It is long and hard to obtain but when one has it there's no getting rid of it; one simply has to cope with it. Don't think for a minute that your friends will telephone you every evening, as they ought to, in order to find out if this doesn't happen to be the evening when you are deciding to commit suicide, or simply whether you don't need company, whether you are not in the mood to go out. No, don't worry, they'll ring up the evening you are not alone, when life is beautiful. As for suicide, they would be more likely to push you to it, by virtue of what you owe to yourself, according to them. May heaven protect us, cher Monsieur, from being set upon a pedestal by our friends!"

"Don't lies eventually lead to the truth? And don't all my stories, true or false, tend toward the same conclusion? Don't they all have the same meaning? So what does it matter whether they are true or false if, in both cases, they are significant of what I have been and what I am? Sometimes it is easier to see clearly into the liar than into the man who tells the truth. Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object."

"I love life - that's my real weakness. I love it so much that I am incapable of imagining what is not life."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Is the division of French literature into century units significant? Do the different centuries of French literature have their own character? If so, why might that be true?

Which genre of French literature seems to you to be 'strongest,' that is most deeply representative of a particular period? In which genre do French writers seem to excel? To be weakest?

Do women writers make a unique contribution to French literature, or is there no separate character to women's contribution? Who seem to you the greatest French women writers?

France has historically deep roots in Catholicism, and more generally in the religious sensibility. But in what writers does this trait of French culture most clearly manifest itself? When does 'freethinking' start to shape the national temperament? With what writers is freethinking most prominent?

Do you see a significant continuity between mediaeval French literature and the sixteenth century materials we read? Or do you think the mediaeval remains a pan European cultural condition, without ties to the more modern concept of the nation state?

Is French literature on the whole a politically/socially engaged literature? At what periods do you find this engagement most evident? Can you extend your response into our own century? Is French literature engaged today? Or was Jean Paul Sartre the last large example of French literary *engagement*?

Does the Greco Roman past play a significant role in the shaping of French literature? Where do you find that influence most evident? Is it still present today?