

## FRENCH LITERATURE - 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Unit 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 Valery 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?