

## MUSSET, ALFRED DE

**Musset, Alfred de; his significance for his time.** Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) was a French poet, dramatist, moralist, and arguably one of the first French Romantic poets, who fit many of the stereotypes frequently attached to that breed of creator: susceptibility to intense and idealistic amour, vanity, powerful imagination, and, interestingly enough, an interest and involvement with the public sphere. He is especially remembered for his *Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle* (1836) , *Confession of a Child of the Century*.

**Musset, Alfred de: life and career.** De Musset was born in Paris. His family was upper class but poor, in the sense that de Musset's father was stingy and refused any money for his son. De Musset's mother was a society hostess. Between the two not very nurturing parents, Alfred de Musset carved out a private world, in which as a youngster he created and acted out mini-plays, and told poems and stories to himself. At the age of nine de Musset was sent to the distinguished Lycée Henry IV, where he displayed his brilliance and won the highly competitive Latin Prize. At the age of seventeen he was invited to join the prestigious literary salon of the poet Charles Nodier, but he was surrounded by voices telling him it was time to 'get a job.' In search of a congenial job, Alfred de Musset tried medicine, law, drawing, tutoring English, giving piano lessons. None of these professions caught his commitment, but fortunately he was about to score a public success with a piece of writing that was engaging him, the *Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie* (1829), *Tales of Spain and Italy*. By the age of twenty he was a popular literary figure in Paris and a dandy around town. Soon afterwards he, like Lord Byron in England, began to poke fun at some of the absurdities of the foppish or spaced out Romantics. Nor was Alfred de Musset living off the air all this time, for like many of the supposedly dreamy Romantics he was involved in political social affairs. He was appointed Librarian of the Ministry of the Interior during the July Monarchy, and played a substantive role in the Rhine crisis which developed between France and Germany in 1840. The burning drama of de Musset's life, his two year love affair with the writer Georges Sand, was just in the offing (1833-35), and was to form the substance of much of de Musset's best poetry. The later years of de Musset's life were to open him to welcome honors—in 1853 he was made Minister of Public Instruction, in 1845 he was awarded the Legion d'honneur, and in 1852, on the third try, he was inducted into the *Académie française*.

**Alfred de Musset works.** All of de Musset's poems are contained in two volumes: *Premieres poésies* (1829-1835) and *Poesies nouvelles* (1836-1852). *The Tales of Spain and Italy* are youthful effusions full of Byronic swagger and cynicism. The affair with Georges Sand sobered and matured de Musset, and transformed his swagger into despair. The four "Night poems," perhaps his best efforts, reflect that despair. In "Memory," 1841, de Musset finds consolation in the thought that beautiful memories can live on even after love is dead. With the possible exception of Vigny, he is the most introspective of the French romantic poets, and he is about the only one who gives us genuine and intimate descriptions of the joys and pains of love.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*The Confession of a child of the Century*, Alfred de Musset, tr. David Coward, 2014.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Levin, Susan, *The Romantic Art of Confession*, 1998.

#### **Further reading**

Alfred de Musset, *Historical Dramas*, tr. Sices, 1987.

### **Original language reading**

Barnell, Rex, *Etude analytique de l'influence de Shakespeare sur le theatre d'Alfred de Musset*, 1988.

### **Suggested paper topics**

What do you think of the public prominence of Alfred de Musset? Does it play a similar role in his life, to that played in the life of Lamartine, who also served in high office while writing passionate poetry?

Look closely into some of de Musset's love poetry. What kind of passions does he express there? Is there 'sensuous material,' as we might expect it today, or is the level of discourse somewhat formulaic and idealistic?

Excerpt

[http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/224009.Alfred\\_de\\_Musset](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/224009.Alfred_de_Musset)

"How glorious it is – and also how painful – to be an exception. "

"You're like a lighthouse shining beside the sea of humanity, motionless: all you can see is your own reflection in the water. You're alone, so you think it's a vast, magnificent panorama. You haven't sounded the depths. You simply believe in the beauty of God's creation. But I have spent all this time in the water, diving deep into the howling ocean of life, deeper than anyone. While you were admiring the surface, I saw the shipwrecks, the drowned bodies, the monsters of the deep"

"Romanticism is the abuse of adjectives."

"Man is a pupil, pain is his teacher."

"Alas, everything that men say to one another is alike; the ideas they exchange are almost always the same, in their conversation. But inside all those isolated machines, what hidden recesses, what secret compartments! It is an entire world that each one carries within him, an unknown world that is born and dies in silence! What solitudes all these human bodies are!"

"Life is a deep sleep of which love is the dream"

"What I need is a woman who is something, anything: either very beautiful or very kind or in the last resort very wicked; very witty or very stupid, but something."