

## BAUDELAIRE, CHARLES

**Charles Baudelaire's achievement.** Charles Baudelaire (1821-1868) was a French Romantic poet, critic, and translator (especially of Edgar Allan Poe) who assimilated the spirit of early Romantic poetry—de Vigny, de Musset, Victor Hugo—and who carried it into more innovative directions which would eventually prove formative for the whole of twentieth century poetry.

**Baudelaire, life and works.** Charles Baudelaire, whom some have called the father of all subsequent modern poetry in France, was born in Paris in 1821. His father, a senior civil servant, was thirty-four years older than his mother, and died when Charles was a youngster, leaving the mother to remarry—to the lifelong displeasure of Charles, who adored his mother. Charles was given a conventional education, and eventually sent to the Lycée Louis le Grand, where he proved to be a restless and inconstant student, with a taste for rebellion. While at school he ran after prostitutes—contracting syphilis and gonorrhoea—and ran through a small fortune, coming out on the other side into heavy debt. He was even sent on a trip to Calcutta at this time, 1841; an effort by Charles' stepfather to 'bring him down to earth.' But in fact the sights and scenes of India only served as raw material for the sights and scenes that Baudelaire was to make of them in poetry. (The strains and abuses of this period, added to what was going to be a life filled with laudanum and excess alcohol, contributed to his early death, and to the massive stroke which ultimately left him aphasic for the last year of his life.) A fellow writer to the Parnassians, he was during his early years vigorously engaged with the writing of lyric, and with the formulating of the 'modernist' aesthetic, for which he is deeply remembered today. His greatest poetic work, which goes to the heart of his lifetime of writing, is *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), in which Baudelaire fully develops his basic themes—the essential power of symbols to move the soul, the richness of combined sense impressions as we take them in from nature, and ultimately the boredom, or 'ennui' resident in the human condition, which links to our susceptibility to evil, addictions, and a taste for the darkness of the occult. All of these basic themes echo out in other works: *L'Art romantique* (1868), *Petits Poèmes en prose* (1868) in which Baudelaire creates the new genre of the prose poem, and a brilliant translation of Poe's short stories; and, indirectly, in the writing and engagement of Baudelaire with his own cultural moment, defending the art of the painter Delacroix and the opera creator Wagner, and figuring prominently in the Parisian art scene, most notably in the reviews published in his *Salon* of 1845.

**Evaluation of Baudelaire's work.** It is hard to overstate the breakthrough of Baudelaire into a new poetic atmosphere. In addition to the 'modernist' traits mentioned above, he excelled at a sense of the meaning of the city, that new expanding, polluting, thrilling sensibility-shaper that was looming over the citizens of Paris as the nineteenth century took shape. It was in this matrix that Baudelaire saw the interesting evil of mankind, the ways in which nature is less interesting than human society, and the complexities of the moral compass. His chaste but sensuous formal verse, and his highly original prose poems, opened totally new vistas into the creation of the aesthetic.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, tr. Charvet, 1981.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Wilson, Edmund, *Azel's Castle*, 1962.

#### **Further reading**

Hyslop, Lois, *Baudelaire, Man of his Time*, 1980.

### **Original language reading**

Kristeva, Julia, *La révolution du langage poétique*, 1974.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Review what we know of Baudelaire's youth. What kind of a rebel was he? Was the imagination, from the start, the site of his true inner life? Does Baudelaire's taste for evil seem to you imaginative evil or 'real evil'? What drives him to his kind of concern with the 'diabolic'?

What is the meaning of the city, for Baudelaire? Was the city itself, the real living city, a new phenomenon in Western society? How old and big was a city like Paris, when Balzac walked its streets? What parts of Paris were dear and meaningful to Baudelaire, the flaneur?

**Excerpt** <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/039250.html>

To the Reader

Folly, depravity, greed, mortal sin  
Invade our souls and rack our flesh; we feed  
Our gentle guilt, gracious regrets, that breed  
Like vermin glutting on foul beggars' skin.  
Our sins are stubborn; our repentance, faint.  
We take a handsome price for our confession,  
Happy once more to wallow in transgression,  
Thinking vile tears will cleanse us of all taint.  
On evil's cushion poised, His Majesty,  
Satan Thrice-Great, lulls our charmed soul, until  
He turns to vapor what was once our will:  
Rich ore, transmuted by his alchemy.  
He holds the strings that move us, limb by limb!  
We yield, enthralled, to things repugnant, base;  
Each day, towards Hell, with slow, unhurried pace,  
We sink, uncowed, through shadows, stinking, grim.  
Like some lewd rake with his old worn-out whore,  
Nibbling her suffering teats, we seize our sly  
delight, that, like an orange—withered, dry—  
We squeeze and press for juice that is no more.  
Our brains teem with a race of Fiends, who frolic  
thick as a million gut-worms; with each breath,  
Our lungs drink deep, suck down a stream of Death—  
Dim-lit—to low-moaned whimpers melancholic.  
If poison, fire, blade, rape do not succeed  
In sewing on that dull embroidery  
Of our pathetic lives their artistry,  
It's that our soul, alas, shrinks from the deed.  
And yet, among the beasts and creatures all—  
Panther, snake, scorpion, jackal, ape, hound, hawk—  
Monsters that crawl, and shriek, and grunt, and squawk,  
In our vice-filled menagerie's caterwaul,  
One worse is there, fit to heap scorn upon—  
More ugly, rank! Though noiseless, calm and still,  
yet would he turn the earth to scraps and swill,  
swallow it whole in one great, gaping yawn:

Ennui! That monster frail!—With eye wherein  
A chance tear gleams, he dreams of gibbets, while  
Smoking his hookah, with a dainty smile. . .  
—You know him, reader,—hypocrite,—my twin!