

# FRENCH LITERATURE - 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

## Overview

French literature of the nineteenth century can be roughly divided into two sections.

The first half of the century can be called by the term Romantic, for it picks up on tendencies evident in the French literature of the late 18th century, like the *Querelle des anciens des modernes*, which reflected a growing interest in the expression of feelings, and in independence from the past, which had the germs of the Romantic in it. But that is just a literary beginning, to the change in sensibility the Romantic heralds in. The first half of the 19th century in France also explodes with political and social energies, in which were released many of the open feelings and freed thoughts which became part of the Romantic perspective in literature and the other arts, as well as in morals and philosophy. The declaration of Napoleon as consul, in 1799, and Emperor in 1804, was the launching pad first for great French optimism, that a new era of growth and justice was at hand, and then for growing dismay at the abuses and humiliations of Napoleon. After Waterloo, in 1815, a despotic monarch was chosen to lead the nation, then replaced by a revolution, then a second (constitutional) monarchy was called in, headed by Louis Philippe, who was again replaced in 1848, by Louis Napoleon, a nephew of Napoleon I. As a result of these many changes, and the uncertainties accompanying them, creative forces, as well as hindrances, were freed in the society, and took expression in new literary voices which seem to come from a different world from that of Malherbe and Boileau, in the preceding century.

A survey of French literature of the last half of the nineteenth century consists in large measure of a discussion of four *isms*: realism, naturalism, Parnassianism, and Symbolism.

By 1842 the old forms of Romanticism that had been triumphant during the fourth decade of the century were already on their way out, although Hugo and a few others continued to write some Romantic verse for many years thereafter. Realism, of which there had been distinct traces since 1830, now received a powerful boost from several sources: first, the large number of eccentric—and usually indigent—writers and artists who lead a “Bohemian” life in the Latin Quarter of Paris, and who scoffed both at the ugly mediocrity of the bourgeoisie, and at the egoistic pessimism of some of the Romantics; and second, the caricaturists and painters of the Barbizon school (especially Corot and Millet) who reacted against the violence and unreality of the Romantic school of painting; the Barbizon artists turned to French landscapes and simple life for their subjects.

After 1850 two kinds of realism became discernible: first, artistic realism promoted by the proponents of “art for art’s sake,” a school of which Théophile Gautier was a prominent member, and in which we might well want to include Flaubert and the Parnassians; second, the schools of realism or naturalism, which Emile Zola, the founder of naturalism, defined as “the formula of modern science applied to literature.” Naturalism actually went a step beyond the earlier realism in targeting the sordid and unsavory for particular attention.

## Discussion questions

Can you see a case for considering Alfred de Musset and Alphonse de Lamartine as the quintessential Romantic poets? If so, what traits do they share? If not, what authors seem to you to epitomize the Romantic spirit in France?

Compare Hugo to Balzac as a novelist of vast panoramic ambitions. Which writer seems to you better able to grasp the whole spirit of a time?

The lyrics of Mallarmé and Rimbaud are profoundly different, the one condensed and pure, the other expansive and visionary. Do you see something in common to the work of these two writers?

De Maupassant's great literary model was Gustave Flaubert. What did de Maupassant learn from Flaubert? Did he learn style, viewpoint, or philosophy from his master?

How do you explain the extraordinary political canniness of Benjamin Constant? Is that canniness related to the view of human nature expressed in *Adolphe*?