

## GIDE, ANDRE

**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."