

RIMBAUD, ARTHUR

Arthur Rimbaud, life. Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891) was a precocious French poet, whose visionary work, completed before he was 21, made an indelible mark on the development of later French poetry, and whose personal destiny has haunted the imaginations of subsequent generations of writers worldwide.

Arthur Rimbaud; a portrait of his career. Rimbaud was born in Charleville, in the province of the Ardennes. His father, a military captain cited for bravery in the Conquest of Algeria, was almost never at home—postings, then disinclination, kept him away, until he had no presence at all in the family. Rimbaud's mother dominated the family—there were five children—and won from her precocious Arthur, who already as a pre schooler was writing poems, the sobriquet 'bouche d'ombre,' 'mouth of darkness,' for her sullen and stern ways and her omnipresent control over her children. Nothing stopped Rimbaud's youthful activity as a poet, and, given his generally rebellious style, his Mother's brooding insistence on education was probably beneficial; she oversaw young Arthur's intense memorization of Latin poetry, and gave him youthful freedom only to continue his schooling at the Collège de Charleville. At that school, and with the tutelage of a couple of understanding intellectuals, Arthur became a stunning academic success, top of his class except in math and science. He was, however, not destined to an academic career, nor was this teen ager patient after graduation from Charleville. With the advent of the Franco-Prussian War, in 1870, Rimbaud began a series of attempts to run away and seek his freedom. In the course of these efforts at liberation he took the liberty of writing to the poet Paul Verlaine, who invited Rimbaud to stay with him in Paris in 1871; the two rebels became lovers, traveled together to and lived in England, and eventually—after stormy times, during which the teen age Rimbaud wrote constantly—broke up, but not before Verlaine, drunken and wild, had shot and seriously wounded Rimbaud. In the midst of such scenes Rimbaud truly decided upon escape from all that he had known, and in 1876 enlisted with the Dutch Colonial Army—only to desert not long after, and to make his way exhaustedly back to Paris. By this stage Rimbaud is just over twenty, and has virtually finished his writing career. The remaining years of his life—as a businessman in Harar, Ethiopia, and the first major coffee trader in that country, as well as jack of all trades working his way from port to port along the East African coast—remain outside our scope in this entry, except as living materials of an improbably brilliant poetic career. Rimbaud died of cancer at the age of thirty seven.

Arthur Rimbaud, works. Rimbaud's best known works are *A Season in Hell*, *Une Saison en Enfer*, and the *Illuminations*, 1874. These works of visionary poetry and prose poetry take their springboard in Baudelaire's own addled eye for contemporary society, but move far out toward the kinds of acid-inspired envisionings we may find among the American Beats of the mid-twentieth century. Rimbaud's own formulation of his quest is the last word on the matter:

I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious, and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessences. This is an unspeakable torture during which he needs all his faith and superhuman strength, and during which he becomes the great patient, the great criminal, the great accursed – and the great learned one! – among men. – For he arrives at the unknown!

Reading

Primary source reading

Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, tr. ed. Wallace Fowlie, Jean Nicolas, 2005.

Secondary source reading

Wilson, Edmund, *Rimbaud: the Double Life of a Rebel*, 2000.

Further reading

Nicholl, Charles, *Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa (1882-91)*, 1999.

Original language reading

Jeancolas, Claude, *Passion Rimbaud: L'Album d'une vie*, 1998.

Suggested paper topics

Rethink the scandalous relation between Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. Would we not still today, after we have 'seen everything,' be startled by such a public relationship? (Or would we?) What kind of contempt for settled social norms was driving these writers? Did it lie in 'hatred of the bourgeoisie'?

Look into Rimbaud's career as a coffee trader, after he stopped writing at the age of twenty. Was Rimbaud successful as a businessman? What kind of trading operations did he supervise in Harar? Was the poet-visionary still at work in him there?

Excerpt

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/childhood-70/>

That idol, black eyes and yellow mop, without parents or court,
nobler than Mexican and Flemish fables;
his domain, insolent azure and verdure,
runs over beaches called by the shipless waves,
names ferociously Greek, Slav, Celt.

At the border of the forest-- dream flowers tinkle, flash, and flare,--
the girl with orange lips, knees
crossed in the clear flood that gushes from the fields,
nakedness shaded, traversed, dressed by rainbow, flora, sea.

Ladies who stroll on terraces adjacent to the sea;
baby girls and giantesses,
superb blacks in the verdigris moss,
jewels upright on the rich ground
of groves and little thawed gardens,--
young mothers and big sisters with eyes full of pilgrimages,
sultanas, princesses tyrannical of costume and carriage,
little foreign misses and young ladies gently unhappy.
What boredom, the hour of the 'dear body' and 'dear heart.'
II.

It is she, the little girl, dead behind the rosebushes. --
The young mamma, deceased, comes down the stoop.--
The cousin's carriage creaks on the sand.--
The little brother (he is in India!) there,
before the western sky in the meadow of pinks.

The old men who have been buried upright
in the rampart overgrown with gillyflowers.
Swarms of golden leaves surround the general's house.

They are in the south.--

You follow the red road to reach the empty inn.
The chateau is for sale; the shutters are coming off.
The priest must have taken away the key of the church.
Around the park the keepers' cottages are uninhabited.

The enclosures are so high that nothing
can be seen but the rustling tree tops.
Besides, there is nothing to be seen within.
The meadows go up to the hamlets without anvils or cocks.

The sluice gate is open.
O the Calvaries and the windmills of the desert,
the islands and the haystacks!
Magic flowers droned.

The slopes cradled him.
Beasts of a fabulous elegance moved about.
The clouds gathered over the high sea,
formed of an eternity of hot tears.