

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## LAMARTINE, ALPHONSE DE (1790-1869)

**Alphonse de Lamartine; life and Works.** Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) was born in Macon in Burgundy, of an old aristocratic family. After a happy childhood, he went to school at the Jesuit Seminary in Belley. Then he spent four years of leisure and reading at Milly. In 181, while traveling in Italy, he became infatuated with a young cigarette maker in Naples, whom he later idealized in the book *Graziella*. Returning to France, he served first as a member of the royal guard of Louis XVIII and later as an attaché to the diplomatic corps at Naples. In 1816 he fell in love with Mme. Julie Charles, who died the following year; she inspired many of his poems. The publication of *The Poetic Meditations*, in 1820, assured his fame. In 1829 he was elected a member of the *Académie Française*. After the fall of Charles X, he gave up his diplomatic career and campaigned for a seat in the Assembly. At first unsuccessful, he was eventually elected (1833), and from then until 1848 played an increasingly important role in national politics. He opposed the bourgeois government of Louis Philippe. Directly after the Revolution of 1848 he was the virtual dictator of France—for about three months. Then the fickle and radical mob abandoned him for the glamorous Louis Napoleon, and Lamartine retired permanently from politics. Always extravagant and generous, he now fell into financial difficulties and spent the last years of his life writing continually, principally hackwork for periodicals.

**The poetry of Lamartine.** The chief literary influences on Lamartine were the Bible, Rousseau, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand, Petrarch, Tasso, Milton, Ossian and Young. Whereas Chateaubriand wrote about religion, nature, and himself, Lamartine wrote about religion, nature, and women; and, like Chateaubriand, he often associated two or perhaps all three of the topics in one work. His religious is vaguer and less orthodox than that of Chateaubriand, but it is also deeper and more idealistic, sometimes inclining toward pantheism. Lamartine's imagination is audial rather than visual; his descriptions are usually lacking in color—done principally in blacks and whites and grays. He prefers to describe floating or soaring things—clouds winds and waves—it being, as a critic observed, his nature to dematerialize everything he touches. Much of his love poetry is idealistic and Platonic, and, like that of Petrarch, tends to identify the physical with the spiritual. It often displays a note of melancholy.

**Some individual works.** Some of Lamartine's best individual lyrics are 'The Lake,' which combines melancholy, love, and appreciation for nature; the 'Crucifix,' in which he associates his love for Elvire (Julie Charles) with his religious beliefs; and 'Song of Love,' a poem to his wife. *Jocelyn* is a long narrative poem which tells of the pure love of a priest for a young girl, and of his renunciation. The 'Fall of an Angel' is a long (11,000 lines) epic about an angel who, through love for a human woman, becomes human himself. Lamartine also wrote several prose works. *Raphael* (1849) and *Graziella* (1852) are semiautobiographical novels. The first is partially based on his love for Mme. Charles; the other on his affair with the Neapolitan cigarette maker. The *History of the Girondins* (1847) is an inspirational but untrustworthy account of one portion of the French Revolution; the book helped to foment the Revolution of 1848.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

<http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2010/04/lamartine-lake-from-french.html>

#### **Secondary source reading**

Fortescue, William, *Alphonse de Lamartine: A Political Biography*, 1983.

#### **Further reading**

Mackay, John, *Inscription and Modernity: From Wordsworth to Mandelstam*, 2010.

### **Original language reading**

Benichou, Paul, *Le Sacre de l'écrivain*, 1985.

### **Suggested paper topics**

Do you see a bond between Lamartine's Romantic poetic creativity, and his political prominence? Was it his belief that the individual should express and promote all his skills and talents? In whatever realm?

Does Lamartine's poetry mark a sharp break from the French lyric of the century that preceded him? Where, in French poetry before Lamartine, would you have to go to find the deep expression of lyric emotion? Would it be Ronsard?

**Excerpt** [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alphonse\\_de\\_Lamartine](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Alphonse_de_Lamartine)

If greatness of purpose, smallness of means, and astonishing results are the three criteria of a human genius, who could dare compare any great man in history with Muhammad? The most famous men created arms, laws, and empires only. They founded, if anything at all, no more than material powers which often crumbled away before their eyes. This man moved not only armies, legislations, empires, peoples, dynasties, but millions of men in one-third of the then inhabited world; and more than that, he moved the altars, the gods, the religions, the ideas, the beliefs and the souls. Philosopher, Orator, Apostle, Legislator, Conqueror of Ideas, Restorer of Rational beliefs... The founder of twenty terrestrial empires and of one spiritual empire — that is Muhammad. As regards all standards by which human greatness may be measured, we may well ask, is there any man greater than he?

Sometimes, only one person is missing, and the whole world seems depopulated.

Time, arrest your flight! and you, propitious hours, arrest your course! Let us savor the fleeting delights of our most beautiful days!

I say to this night: "Pass more slowly"; and the dawn will come to dispel the night.

Let us love the passing hour, let us hurry up and enjoy our time.

Love alone was left, as a great image of a dream that was erased.

Limited in his nature, infinite in his desires, man is a fallen god who remembers the heavens.

What is our life but a succession of preludes to that unknown song whose first solemn note is sounded by death?