

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **BonjourTristesse** (1954) Francoise Sagan (1935-2004)

A few bars of background music from any jazz bar in the 1920's will evoke an era as no other music will evoke any other modern era. Is it a question of technology--Adolf Sax's inventiveness in wringing nostalgias out of brass? or is it the intimate family memory of Stock Market Collapse, which still sends tremors down the family spine? In either case it remains one of the mysteries, of music in culture, that the two seem to borrow characteristic tonalities from one another. This kind of intertonal resonance can even jump decades in reverse as when, this afternoon in 2026, I play on my laptop musical videos of Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* and am at once transported back into a scene from my youth, in a small town in Connecticut. One would be tempted to say that such tonalities lurk in the atmosphere.

Whatever the metaphysics involved here, there is no doubt that certain musical and or literary ears can capture and hold' the spirit of their time. Francoise Sagan was one of those ears. At eighteen, she pulled out of the air, a novel called *Bonjour Tristesse* which vibrated with her time and what she knew of it. And what was the tone of that age? It is most easily described as a look alike twin to the Jazz Age of the Twenties, which was the fruiting environment of the post war WW I survival, a promise of West to itself to recall the good times, to keep on trucking even when the skies are darkening. That trucking atmosphere that prompted Sagan to her guiding genius, a sense for recording a certain reckless enjoyment in life. The craziness of modern joie de vivre has never been better captured unless by F. Scott Fitzgerald did it in *The Great Gatsby*.

Both Fitzgerald and Sagan had the guts to look beyond the rag time. Fitzgerald was too smart to pretend, even for a moment, that *Gatsby* could use sensibility to break out from the ultimate fatality of life. Even living loss and terror and looking them in the face as our condition could not spare *Gatsby* the pervasive sense of sadness in things. As for Cecile, she might seem to have had ebullience under her control, and to know just what to do with it. But how much she had to learn. The *BONJOUR* was just getting started--daddy and daughter were just falling into their Riviera groove again, when Anna burst back anti historically onto the scene again. Bitter explosion, from within the family turned the condition humaine into the tragedie humaine.

Fifty years after the revolution brought into western thinking by the experiments and discussions made familiar by Sigmund Freud, it was high time to carry evolving proposals into the new fields of technical mental understanding. No longer did it make sense, forever, simply to say of Shakespeare, for that instance, simply to expostulate that he had 'plumbed the depths of the 'human soul,' It became relevant to show some wider technical understanding of the habitual operations of the human soul--whatever the view of Freud on it be. One need only look into the work of a dramatist like Ibsen, a contemporary of Freud, to sense the differences left by Freudianism on the entire fabric of the modern dramatic tradition. Without attending only to Freud, particularly, Ibsen has absorbed the whole Freudian perspective hand and glove.

The passage of a century, since the death of Freud, will by now have left Freud's worldview, psychiatric pragmatism, as a legacy to the human condition. So routine have become the central tenets Freud maintained--the clash of ego with id; the omnipresence of sexuality in human behavior and motivation, the omnipresence of the unconscious in human behavior--that the deep presence of sexuality in the human condition is no longer up for doubting. In the Freud with Ibsen course into the origins to the origins of that century shared by--think back to the origins of the sexual liberation movements a century ago --we can trace the dissolutions of many assumptions about the limits of human behavior. It astonishes few, nowadays, that the once supposedly rock stable notion of gender is up for grabs. We can attribute this breakdown in part to changes in society, which now dictate various notions of an open society, in which it is accepted that people make their own societies, and are free to make them as they wish. The broad,

and of course contentious, point being made here backgrounds a cultural setting in which the male-female dichotomy no longer dominates the scene.