

A Survey of  
**French Literature**

VOLUME V  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Third Edition

MORRIS BISHOP  
KENNETH T. RIVERS

A SURVEY OF

# French Literature

VOLUME FIVE:  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

MORRIS BISHOP

*THIRD EDITION*

KENNETH T. RIVERS

*For Dianna Lipp Rivers*

with added appreciation to  
Beatrice Rivers and Alison Jolly

#### NOTE ABOUT ILLUSTRATIONS

One of the most easily noticed differences between this edition and its predecessors is the addition of extensive visual material. Nearly half the new illustrations included have come from the Bibliothèque nationale de France (the French National Library), which was of considerable help to the editor. The remaining illustrations are, except for the few noted otherwise, in the public domain and derived primarily from rare books in private collections. The line drawings illustrating each century are by Alison Mason Kingsbury; they constitute the only pictures carried over from the previous editions.

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# Preface

The editors of this compilation have been guided by certain principles: to introduce the student to the greatest masters of French literature; to make a Survey of Literature rather than a course in literary history; to choose famous examples rather than obscure ones; to choose examples more for their merit, interest, and present vitality than for their “significance” or importance for other than literary reasons; to present one long selection in preference to a collection of *morceaux*; and to make the entire text as user-friendly as possible for instructor and student alike.

This volume is divided into fifteen lessons, representing the maximum number of assignments usually possible in an American college semester. Even so, in the choice of selections, the editors have been forced to compromise sometimes. In choosing texts, a balancing of qualities has been necessary, as not every work of an important author is simultaneously interesting, famous, self-contained, and of convenient length. The editors have made what seemed to them the best choice for the readers’ purposes.

In this Third Edition, account has been taken of suggestions offered by many over past years. We are proud to give a greater representation to women writers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Yourcenar, Vera Feyder, Anne Hébert and Amélie Nothomb, all of whom have now been added to our roster of twentieth-century authors. There is also more representation of authors from outside of France, such as three of the four above-mentioned writers, as well as André Breton, Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Samuel Beckett, Abdellatif Laâbi, and Zachary Richard. And we have seen fit to add other famous names such as Jules Verne, Antonin Artaud, Claude Simon, and Jean Genet. Eric Rohmer has been inserted as the first screenplay writer in the anthology, an indication of the importance of cinema in the century. The selections from a few of the other authors throughout the edition, such as Marcel Proust and André Gide, have been somewhat shortened to make them more manageable for class assignments. The footnotes throughout have been somewhat amplified, in order to assist students who may not have the strongest of vocabularies or much background in French culture. The introductions have been expanded, updated, and reorganized. Bibliographical information is now included at the end of the volume. And as regards the appearance of the text, numerous visual materials have been added, including, where possible, portraits of authors or pictures of their home-town areas in order to give a sense of social context and make their work seem all the more real to the reader. Moreover, the appearance of the text has been modernized to enhance clarity and ease of use.

Your editors will embark on no long defense of their own judgment, which others have every right to impugn. No doubt every instructor will quarrel with a number of the editors’ choices and omissions. Some authors are absent from this volume because their rights-owners were unresponsive. In other cases, it was necessary to make cuts in order to expand the selections of important authors such as Apollinaire, Cocteau, and Camus, as well as to make room for new writers – a half-century’s worth since the Second Edition. Some readers will bemoan the absence of Giraudoux, Saint-Exupéry, Malraux, and a few of the lesser poets whose reputations have declined over the years. We are sorry, but the French-speaking world has happily produced more immortals with more great works to their credit than we can accommodate. Still, the texts of the thirty-two authors present presumably supply more than enough reading for anyone’s needs.

Introductions and footnotes are in English. Our students need not labor with an editor’s

French; they might better get on as fast as possible to the memorable words of the great authors.

In the footnotes, words and phrases which would not be in the vocabulary of a typical good student are translated, and other aids to fluent reading and ready comprehension are given. Since footnotes should aid and not distract, the editors have struggled against the temptation to give unnecessary information. What is there is enough to keep most students from having to consult the dictionary or the encyclopedia very often.

He gave you the freedom to do something that looked good but turned out to be against your own interests. In just such a way, we are all manipulated by those who exercise power and offer us bogus choices. We must therefore be constantly vigilant in the utilization of our own freedom.

5. An individual has no predetermined nature or character. His “psychology” is nothing but the succession of his acts. He is what he decides to be. He makes his being by his chosen actions, and these may bring him through despair to liberty. Says Sartre’s Oreste, in *Les Mouches*: “Human life begins on the far side of despair.” At least, human life begins; it imposes upon us responsibility for our actions and for the selves that we create. The world is full of injustice, but fighting injustice is the main act that may give life meaning.

Existentialism has made its converts among philosophers, literary men, and the cultivated public. It had a considerable vogue in America for a long time, especially among young theological students. It fathered an entire Literature of the Absurd. It has also become, in vulgarized form, a mere rejection of purpose and morality, for many a criminal is a corrupt existentialist without knowing it. Existentialism also popularized many a nightclub on Paris’ Left Bank, where young people wallowing in chronic depression wore black, smoked potent cigarettes, drank pastis, listened to jazz, and posed as intellectuals or budding filmmakers. Some still do.



## Jean-Paul Sartre

[1905–1980]

### Cultural Giant

In the entire history of French letters there have been only a handful of figures who have dominated their entire culture. Sartre, like Descartes, Voltaire, and Hugo, is one of them. Raising the profession of intellectual to the top of the social pyramid, Sartre changed the way the French think about life, and the way the French think overall.

### Philosopher at Large

Jean-Paul-Charles-Aymard Sartre was born in Paris, of a middle-class background. He was a cousin of a famous winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, the physician-humanitarian Dr. Albert Schweitzer. Jean-Paul lost his father in childhood. He claimed that this lack of a father figure helped him become self-made, although the reality is that Sartre spent his formative years in a household with his grandfather in the town of Meudon. Considering himself an ugly, short, cross-eyed child, Jean-Paul (nicknamed Poulou) was unhappy and interested more in books than in his fellow children. The family moved back to Paris in 1911,



*Jean Paul Sartre on the balcony of his home in the Place Saint-Germain-des-Pres (1964). © Photofest.*

where Jean-Paul had the opportunity to attend some of the best schools. Despite clashes with his new stepfather, he continued to flourish as a budding philosopher. Early on he began formulating his own systems of thought to replace the standard ones.

Sartre attended the *École Normale Supérieure*, where he forged a relationship with another student, Simone de Beauvoir, herself an important philosopher in years to come. Although they never married, they were companions for life. Sartre went on to take first place in the university's examinations for the *agrégation*, and taught philosophy for ten years in the lycées of Le Havre, Laon, and Paris. (Beauvoir usually had similar teaching jobs nearby.) Sartre won a fellowship to an institute in Berlin in 1933 and gained a working knowledge of the latest German philosophies. No sooner had he published his first novel, the still-revered *La Nausée*, than World War II disrupted his academic life.

## Permanent Revolution

Sartre served in the French Army as an artillery observer (though a terribly nearsighted one), was taken prisoner in 1940, and spent nine months in a German prison camp. It was not wasted time however; he continued his writing, which would eventually result in the publication of his major philosophical treatise *L'Être et néant* and his play *Les Mouches*. He was released from prison for health reasons in 1941; he taught and wrote in Paris and worked in a minor way for the Resistance, mostly passing messages around the Free Zone. After the war, he published his gigantic philosophic demonstrations of existentialism, gained particular success as a playwright, co-edited an immensely influential literary magazine, *Les Temps modernes*, joined and deserted the Communists, and even founded a political party, which demanded a permanent revolution and which did not last very long.

In 1964, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, but refused to accept it on the grounds that it would be “inauthentic” for him to do so. He also never sought entry into the *Académie française*, remarking that he simply did not care to receive any awards from people who write bad books.

He championed many causes for oppressed people. However, his naive support of political disasters such as Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, a Stalinist-like slaughter of dissidents in Communist China that Sartre from afar mistook for a grass-roots democratic movement, left Sartre looking increasingly irrelevant. He always kept writing, though, producing memoirs, a huge biography of Flaubert, and many pieces of literary and social criticism.

Sartre was allied with the young throughout his life, and never cared for the establishment or its honors. He sided with the student protesters that nearly toppled the de Gaulle government in 1968. He also sided with Israel in its struggle for survival, causing a break with most of the other French intellectuals who lined up behind the Palestinians' cause. In his later years, Sartre suffered from failing health, but still chimed in on most of the political and artistic issues of the day. By the time he died in 1980, he was no longer fashionable but still highly respected.

## Philosophical Feeling

All of his works, in many fields, are bold, novel, intelligent, abundant in ideas—and controversial. His imaginative writings are a part of his philosophy, and vice versa. Of course, his philosophical treatises, imposing in bulk and density, can be judged only by philosophers. But his philosophy is not mere speculation, it is a felt philosophy, an impassioned belief, which requires artistic demonstration. Just as Rousseau was a theist because he said he could feel God's presence, so Sartre was an atheist because he said he could feel the void in the universe. And in his plays, novels, and stories, we feel Sartre's

passion for life and humanity. He jumps wholeheartedly into the battle between Good and Evil. Except for considering both God and Satan as fictitious, this outlook is surprisingly close to a Catholic cosmology for a man who spent his life trying to free his fellow French from the domination of Catholicism.

Stylistically, Sartre's work reflects the influence of Ernest Hemingway, whom Sartre admired greatly. Sartre uses much authentic-sounding language, including slang, and keeps his sentences short and free of flourish. You will also remark how Sartre, having rejected the notion of God, consequently rejects the use of God-like omniscient narration, and instead writes from the first-person perspective, telling us only what that one individual could realistically know.

## Testing Grounds

*Le Mur* is the lead story of a collection of the same name that appeared in 1939. *Le Mur* is an imagined episode of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1938. Sartre's sympathies are naturally with the Republican, or radical, side (la Brigade Internationale), which unsuccessfully opposed the fascist government of General Franco, an ally of Hitler's. In many ways, the Spanish Civil War was a testing ground for what became World War II, and the spread of totalitarian dictatorship over Europe. And this story is a testing ground for existentialism, for it takes place mostly inside a jail, a most difficult place for one to exercise one's existential freedom of choice. When you have finished the story, reflect on how far it fulfills the existentialist doctrines that have just been stated.

[*Le Mur*, © Les Editions Gallimard, is reprinted by permission.]



### *LE MUR*<sup>1</sup>

On nous poussa dans une grande salle blanche et mes yeux se mirent à cligner<sup>2</sup> parce que la lumière leur faisait mal. Ensuite je vis une table et quatre types<sup>3</sup> derrière la table, des civils, qui regardaient des papiers. On avait massé les autres prisonniers dans le fond et il nous fallut traverser toute la pièce pour les rejoindre. Il y en avait plusieurs que je connaissais et d'autres qui devaient être étrangers. Les deux qui étaient devant moi étaient blonds avec des crânes ronds; ils se ressemblaient: des Français, j'imagine. Le plus petit remontait<sup>4</sup> tout le temps son pantalon: c'était nerveux.

Ça dura près de trois heures; j'étais abruti<sup>5</sup> et j'avais la tête vide; mais la pièce était bien chauffée et je trouvais ça plutôt agréable: depuis vingt-quatre heures,

nous n'avions pas cessé de grelotter. Les gardiens amenaient les prisonniers l'un après l'autre devant la table. Les quatre types leur demandaient alors leur nom et leur profession. La plupart du temps ils n'allaient pas plus loin—ou bien alors ils posaient une question par-ci, par-là: « As-tu pris part au sabotage des munitions? » Ou bien: « Où étais-tu le matin du 9 et que faisais-tu ? » Ils n'écoutaient pas les réponses ou du moins ils n'en avaient pas l'air: ils se taisaient un moment et regardaient droit devant eux puis ils se mettaient à écrire. Ils demandèrent à Tom si c'était vrai qu'il servait dans la Brigade internationale:<sup>6</sup> Tom ne pouvait pas dire le contraire à cause des papiers qu'on avait trouvés dans sa veste.<sup>7</sup> A Juan ils ne

1. Try to ascertain what the wall of this title might signify or symbolize as you read through the story.  
2. *cligner*: blink.  
3. *types*: guys.  
4. *remontait*: kept hitching up.

5. *abruti*: exhausted, all in.  
6. *Brigade internationale*: unit of volunteers, mostly left-wing sympathizers, who fought for the Spanish Republic in the Civil War against the fascists, 1936–38.  
7. *veste*: coat, uniform blouse.

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