

French Literature, Theatre, Cinema and Culture – 2015-2016

Syllabus

Introduction

This class is for students who have completed French IV or French AP successfully. Its goal is for students to acquire the cultural background essential for a true mastery of the French language. It will present French literature chronologically, in its historical and cultural context, and will touch on the arts, music, philosophy, religion, politics, society and technology. It is primarily a conversation class, but will also have a writing component. Students will read a variety of texts, from poems, to plays, to philosophy, to novels, and will be asked to learn new vocabulary. They will write compositions in class on themes related to our readings. They will also make presentations.

Textbook: *Moments Littéraires*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Note: The following description is based on last year's class, and could be subject to change.

Quarter 1

During the first quarter, we'll focus on two periods of French literature: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance. We'll review the major political and cultural events that marked those times through readings, short documentaries and discussions: the evolving political and social structures, the pulling away of French from Latin, the Crusades, the Great Plague, the Hundred Years War, the rise of Humanism, the great discoveries, the reinterpretation of classical culture, the Reformation, the wars of religion.

For the Middle Ages we'll discover courtly love through *Le Lai du Laustic* from Marie de France, we'll read a popular comedy: *La Farce du Cuvier*, and *Le Printemps*, a poem from Charles d'Orléans. For the Renaissance, we'll read an excerpt of *Gargantua* from François Rabelais, a sonnet from Louise Labé, and another from Joachim du Bellay, an ode from Pierre de Ronsard, and an excerpt of Montaigne's *Essais*, on friendship.

During our discussions on such themes as love, the place of women in society, marriage, politics, time, education, and friendship, we'll look for the modern expressions of those universal themes, and listen to contemporary musical takes on old poems. The students will learn vocabulary from the reading, and write two compositions: a "dissertation" on a subject of a poem from Ronsard, and an essay in the manner of Montaigne.

We'll watch the film *La Reine Margot*, set during the wars of religion, which deals with the wedding of Marguerite de Valois, daughter of Catherine de Médicis, and Henri de Navarre, the protestant prince and future king Henri IV.

Quarter 2

During the second quarter, the students will learn about two major periods of French history and literature. First, we'll look at the seventeenth century, marked by the long reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King. We'll see the continuing struggle for freedom of religion, and a return to religious intolerance. We'll talk about the concentrations of powers in the persona of the king, and the importance of Versailles in the centralization of government and culture. We'll explore the values of Baroque and neo-classicism and the way they shaped politics and the arts, as well as how literature reflected those times, often in a satirical manner. Then we'll look at the Age of the Enlightenment as a reaction against the religious and political tyranny of the classical age. We'll see the rise of Reason as a driving force against superstition and ignorance. We'll talk about the importance of philosophers in reshaping culture and politics. In fact we'll look at the intellectual background work that took place in order to allow for the establishment of modern democracies.

We'll read some of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, an excerpt of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*, and of Pascal's *Pensées*. We'll talk about the rise of the salons and Preciosity, and read a letter from Madame de Sévigné. We'll read Jean de la Fontaine's most famous fable, *La Cigale et la Fourmi*. We'll also read a couple of scenes from the play *L'École des Femmes* by the playwright Molière. We'll open the Enlightenment by looking at Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. We'll then move on to Montesquieu and look at some key passages of *L'Esprit des Lois* and *Les Lettres Persannes*. We'll read the philosophical tale, *Histoire d'un Bon Bramin*, from Voltaire. We'll talk about Rousseau's work on *Le Contrat Social*, and education, and read an excerpt of *Emile*. Finally we'll read the beginning of the play *Le Jeu de L'Amour et du Hazard* by the feminist Marivaux.

The students will write two letters. The first one, in the style of Madame de Sévigné, will be a piece of gossiping. The second will mimic Montesquieu and take a critical look at modern American society.

We'll watch two films, *Molière*, and *Le Pacte des Loups*, to illustrate our discussions.

Quarter 3

During the third quarter, we'll focus on literature from the 19th century. Each student will present an artistic movement of the time: Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism. We'll look at the impact of these movements on painting and music, before we tackle their repercussions on literature. We'll discuss also the consequences of the advent of photography on art and culture in general. We'll talk about urbanism, and in particular about Baron Haussmann's plans to transform Paris. We'll look at politics as well, passing in review the reign of the emperor Napoléon Bonaparte at the end of the French Revolution, the restoration of monarchy and the reigns of Louis XVIII, Charles X, and Louis Philippe, the brief second republic and the lengthy Second Empire under the Reign of Louis Napoléon, and finally the third republic, which brought us into the 20th century. We'll talk about the transition from a cast system to a classed society, with the

emergence of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. We'll see that 19th century literature was politically charged, and mirrored the social and political issues of the time.

From Victor Hugo, we'll read the first few chapters of *Les Misérables*, and the poem *Demain Dès l'Aube*. The students will write a portrait of Bishop Myriel, a key actor in the transformation of Jean Valjean from a convict into a man of good. We'll read *Le Lac* from Alphonse de Lamartine, a quintessential romantic poem. We'll read an excerpt of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, which illustrates the tension between aristocracy and bourgeoisie in times of political transitions. We'll discuss Balzac's desire to observe and reflect on society in a modern scientific manner. We'll read an excerpt of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, which deals with the frustrations of women in a world still very much ruled by men. The students will write a romantic dialogue set in a common space, like that of Emma and Rodolphe at the county fair in *Madame Bovary*. Finally, we'll read an excerpt of Emile Zola's novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*, which describes the advent of modern consumerism.

Quarter 4

During the fourth quarter, we'll finish learning about 19th century literature. To set the scene, we'll talk about The Franco Prussian war and the commune of Paris. The students will present three poets: Baudelaire, Verlaine and Rimbaud. We'll learn about how historical events shaped their writing, as they were all personally touched by the dramatic events that brought the end of the Second Empire. We'll talk about their personal lives: Verlaine's involvement in the Commune, his homosexuality and his substance abuse. Rimbaud's early inspiration, bohème spirit, and his abandonment of poetry for more materialistic pursuits. Baudelaire's pushing the boundaries of decency, and his struggles with censorship when he published *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Then we'll talk about colonization at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Students will present three 20th century intellectual and artistic movements: Surrealism, existentialism and postmodernism. We'll read a poem by Apollinaire, and see his involvement as a soldier in WWI. We'll look at his *Calligrammes*. Finally we'll look at Aimé Césaire's work: an excerpt of his *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, as well as his more theoretical *Discours sur le Colonialisme*. We'll explain his concept of *Négritude*, and his part in the post colonial cultural emancipation of black men and women, and the emergence of a global black conscience.

The students will write a paper on post colonialism, which will focus on Aimé Césaire's role, and will synthesize several of his writings. We'll watch the Film *La Gloire de mon Père*, based on the autobiographical novel of Marcel Pagnol.