

Introduction to French Literature

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Key periods, major authors, defining works, and recurring themes

1. Historical Overview

Period	Approx. Dates	Cultural Context	Representative Works
Medieval (12th? 15th?c.)	1100? 1500	Feudal society, courtly love, rise of vernacular writing	<i>Chanson de Roland</i> , <i>Le Roman de la Rose</i> , Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances
Renaissance (16th ?c.)	1500? 1600	Humanism, Reformation, expansion of printing	François Rabelais – <i>Gargantua et Pantagruel</i> ; Michel de Montaigne – <i>Essais</i>
Classical (17th?c.)	1600? 1700	Absolutist monarchy, salon culture, "rules of neoclassicism"	Pierre Corneille – <i>Le Cid</i> ; Jean Racine – <i>Phèdre</i> ; Molière – <i>Tartuffe</i>
Enlightenment (18th?c.)	1700? 1790	Reason, critique of privilege, early social contract ideas	Voltaire – <i>Candide</i> ; Denis Diderot – <i>Encyclopédie</i> ; Jean-Jacques Rousseau – <i>Les Confessions</i>
Romanticism (early ?mid 19th?c.)	1800? 1850	Reaction to rationalism, emphasis on emotion, nature, individualism	Victor Hugo – <i>Les Misérables</i> ; Alphonse de Lamartine – <i>Méditations poétiques</i> ; Alexandre Dumas père – <i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i>
Realism & Naturalism (mid? late 19th?c.)	1850? 1900	Social observation, scientific determinism, critique of bourgeois life	Gustave Flaubert – <i>Madame Bovary</i> ; Émile Zola – <i>Germinal</i> ; Honoré de Balzac – <i>La Comédie humaine</i>
Symbolism & Decadence (late 19th?c.)	1880? 1910	Emphasis on suggestion, myth, inner experience	Charles Baudelaire – <i>Les Fleurs du mal</i> ; Stéphane Mallarmé – <i>Poésies</i> ; Paul Verlaine – <i>Romances sans paroles</i>

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Modernism (20th c.)	1900? 1945	Avant-garde experimentation, war trauma, existential questioning	Marcel Proust – <i>À la recherche du temps perdu</i> ; André Gide – <i>La Symphonie pastorale</i> ; Jean Cocteau – <i>Les Enfants terribles</i>
Post-War & Existentialism (mid 20th c.)	1945? 1970	Reconstruction, existential angst, absurdism	Albert Camus – <i>L'Étranger</i> ; Jean-Paul Sartre – <i>Les Mots</i> ; Samuel Beckett (Irish) – <i>En attendant Godot</i> (French version)
Contemporary (1970-present)	1970? today	Multiculturalism, post-colonial voices, experimental forms	Marguerite Duras – <i>L'Amant</i> ; Michel Houellebecq – <i>Les Particules élémentaires</i> ; Leïla Slimani – <i>Chanson douce</i>

2. Major Literary Movements & Their Characteristics

| Movement | Core Ideas |