

The Enlightenment in French Literature

The Enlightenment in French Literature

(mid-18th century – c. 1789)

1. Historical & Intellectual Context

Aspect	Details
Timeframe	Roughly 1750–1789 (pre-Revolution)
Key ideas	Reason, progress, liberty, tolerance, critique of tradition, scientific method
Philosophical influences	Locke, Newton, Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu
Social backdrop	Rise of the bourgeoisie, expansion of print culture, salons & cafés, increased literacy, censorship battles
Goal of literature	Serve as a vehicle for moral and social improvement (<i>littérature utile</i>), disseminate Enlightenment ideas to a broad public

2. Major Genres & Their Functions

Genre	Typical Features	Representative Works
Philosophical essay / polemic	Direct argument, satire, irony, moral exhortation	<i>Lettres philosophiques</i> (Voltaire, 1734), <i>Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes</i> (Rousseau, 1755)
Encyclopedic / didactic prose	Systematic presentation of knowledge, collaborative authorship	<i>Encyclopédie</i> (Diderot & d'Alembert, 1751–1772) – 28 volumes
Novel (roman)	Social critique, character types (the naïve, the libertine), realistic settings	<i>Candide</i> (Voltaire, 1759), <i>Les Liaisons dangereuses</i> (Choderlos de Laclos, 1782)
Drama (comédie, tragédie)	Moral didacticism, use of the well-made play structure, reduced reliance on classical unities	<i>Le Père de famille</i> (Beaumarchais, 1778), <i>Le Mariage de Figaro</i> (Beaumarchais, 1778)

The Enlightenment in French Literature

Genre

Typical Features

Representative Works

Satire & fable

Allegory, animal protagonists, sharp social commentary

Fables (La Fontaine – earlier but continually republished), *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (Sade, 1748)

Travel & memoir

Observations of foreign societies to highlight French shortcomings

Lettres persanes (Montesquieu, 1721) – early precursor, later *Voyage en Afrique* (Berlioz)

3. Key Authors & Signature Contributions

Author	Lifespan	Principal Works	Core Contributions
Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet)	1694? 1778	<i>Candide</i> , <i>Zadig</i> , <i>Lettres philosophiques</i>	Master of satire; champion of religious tolerance; popularized Enlightenment ideas through wit and narrative
Denis Diderot	1713? 1784	<i>Encyclopédie</i> (editor), <i>Le Neveu de Rameau</i> , <i>Jacques le fataliste</i>	Architect of the massive collaborative reference work; explored moral relativism and aesthetic theory
Jean-Jacques Rousseau	1712? 1778	<i>Discours sur l'inégalité</i> , <i>Émile</i> , <i>Du contrat social</i>	Emphasized natural human goodness, education, and political legitimacy; influenced Romanticism later
Montesquieu (Charles-Louis de Secondat)	1689? 1755	<i>De l'esprit des lois</i>	Comparative law; articulation