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Culture, Identity, and France: A Glimpse Through the Lens of Literature

Sophia Sanchez · Monday, September 25th, 2023

To think of France is to instantly associate it with high culture, original thought, pioneering political movements, and its penchant for having created a lasting legacy of mellifluous literary heritage. French literature remains inalienable from the human condition and has inspired leading thinkers across cultures and civilizational backgrounds. Beyond its significance in literary and historical circles, the long saga of French excellence in literary intellectualism is also associated with the European power's extended, convoluted, and thought-provoking transitions through various identities.

Modern French perception of self is layered and owes its evolution to numerous seminal periods of literary, political, and technological progress. However, language has remained central to the notion of France, with the nation's literary contributions making it to just about every reading list in the world, be it educational or otherwise. Both language and its development contribute greatly to the formation of a unique cultural identity. The anthropological progressions of language directly connect to the soul of a populace, for it becomes the instrument of communication and free expression of ideas.

"Les limites de ma langue sont les limites de mon monde. (The limits of my language are the limits of my world.)" — Ludwig Wittgenstein, philosopher (1889-1951)

French literary tradition has produced thinkers that defied the norm and wrought forth starkly original notions.

French Ideas Preceding the Renaissance

The strands that connect French literary wealth to history are linked by cords that extend into the region's Roman and Pre-Roman past. French, as a language, evolved through lengthy interactions between the native Gaulish and foreign Latin, which was brought by the invading Roman legions. Progressively, the native flavor of Latin became altered over several centuries, turning into what linguists now call a local variant of Vulgar Latin, which possessed heavy borrowings from the native tongue. By the 8th century, regional languages and dialects had coalesced to give shape to Old French, essentially starting the timer on what many historians believe to be the dawn of French literary exposition. However, the oldest popular works from France are often dated to the 11th century. Traces of Old French are prevalent in older religiopolitical documents such as *The Oaths of Strasbourg*, which were a series of military pacts between two brothers rallying against their older sibling.

The Song of Roland catapults the reader back to the era of the Carolingian empire, painting a rich tapestry of chivalry, valor, and battlefield glory from a conflict that took place in 778CE. Being a medieval form of epic poetry, the work belongs to the 11th century, indicating that it was a retrospective work of epic and historical fiction. Possibly written by a poet known as Turoldus, the acclaimed poem helps us understand what the French held dear at least a millennium ago. The plot in itself is convoluted, taking the reader across geopolitical, religious, and imperial intrigues woven into the story of Roland—Emperor Charlemagne's nephew. Turoldus puts together a flamboyant tale that rallies the spirit alongside instilling religious and national fervor as well as detestation for the enemy. Through epic poetry, the tale hems together action and unflinching commitment against all odds, revealing an epoch that preceded the First Crusade—when religious rhetoric beamed in high octane across the French countryside. This was despite the fact that the tale itself was based in an earlier era.

The other aspect of medieval French literature trained its focus on courtly romance and the ideal of a noble love affair. Often interspersed with complex emotions and themes of tempestuous feelings, compositions of the Troubadour poets dealt with knightly characters along with their pangs of longing affection, often toward a maiden they could not betroth. However, Troubadours' works resembled *Chansons de Geste* in the communication of noble ideals, chivalry, devotion, and selfless valor. Early French literature paints a rather interesting picture of people's lives and their worldly vantage points, often set in the backdrop of the nation's complex sociopolitical history in the pre-Renaissance era. Troubadours like Arnaut Daniel were held in esteem even by exalted early Renaissance figures such as Francesco Petrarch, lending credence to the status of early French literature and the notions it kindled. Besides entertainment, these pieces also shaped societal visions and responses to calls for marching into alien lands to protect regions held in pious reverence.

Humanism, Renaissance Metamorphosis, and Rationalism

The arrival of new ideas from Italy triggered the renaissance in France, precipitating classical revival and a humanist approach.

From the late 14th century, the Renaissance began taking root in affluent regions of Europe such as the Italian city-states. As wealthy merchants and guilds funded revolutionary artists and thinkers in the cities of Venice, Milan, and Florence, the evolution of ideas invariably spread to numerous other regions of Europe, making it a continental reawakening. French writers and poets had already displayed traces of Latin influence as early as the 12th century, with the percolation of ideas relating to classical rediscovery. The trend only strengthened going into the 15–1600s. Following Charles VIII's unsuccessful campaign in Italy, the spread of Renaissance ideals gathered speed. Not long after, his successor—Louis XII—occupied several Italian city-states for a short four-year period before being driven out by another Spanish-led coalition. Apart from the turmoil caused by prolonged war, the invasion of Italy took to France cutting-edge techniques and thoughts in art, literature, and science, paving the way for an all-new era in French literary heritage and national identity.

While the Renaissance period wrought forth more of a pan-European notion, where most thinkers thought themselves to be the rightful inheritors of Greco-Roman heritage, sparks of cultural endemism and French spirit were not amiss. The satirical pentalogy—Gargantua and Pantagruel—written by François Rabelais was an early example of satire in French literature, where the author often questioned the authority of the Church using witty humor. The dawn of rational thought during the renaissance and a detachment from the strict adherence to religious doctrine came to be the distinguishing element (Kuznetsov, 1987). French as a language evolved just as much, transitioning to what is now known as Middle French. Rabelais' work is reflective of a people who were eager to associate with an innately human ideal that determines their fate rather than an oppressive clergy class that determined the masses' connection to a higher power as well as their own identities. Alternatively, Renaissance French poets like Ronsard drew attention to the quaint countryside of 16th-century France while the rest of Europe was steeped in urbane, humanist explorations. Meanwhile, Montaigne's pensive reflections in his *Essays* displayed clear humanist touches by speaking of morals and independent agency as a human being. Renaissance-era French works set the stage for future developments in the Age of Enlightenment, which would bring forth an even greater focus and redevelopment of classical-era aesthetics, thought, and philosophy.

Concretization of French Legacy: From Classicism to the Breakout of Global Conflict

The most critical period for the synthesis of French literature was following the exceptional developments that happened during the Age of Enlightenment.

With the dawn of the Classical Era came an even greater focus and inspiration from a rich European past that had been forgotten following the collapse of the Roman Empire, catapulting Europe into the Dark Ages. Following the Renaissance, French thinkers picked up essential works from treasured Greco-Roman thinkers and wrote tragedies that depicted fundamental struggles in the being of humanity. Works like *Phèdre* explored complex emotional themes that pitted a sense of responsibility against individual desires. Jean Racine flamboyantly emphasizes the necessity of

reason and rationality even in the face of brimming emotions through this treasured work from the 17th century. The play's subtle yet poignant critique of the aristocracy as well as societal institutions and norms could be reflective of the masses' attitudes toward the continuing feudal monarchy in France at the time. Despite being set in Greece, *Phèdre* exudes a uniquely French charm that continues to enamor readers and theater-goers to this day.

In the immediate aftermath of the classical awakening in France, radical and revolutionary thought began taking shape, essentially tantalizing the atmosphere for what the world today recognizes as the most significant people's uprising in early-modern history. Fresh thinkers like Voltaire and Montesquieu brought views that shone the light of rationality, free thought, and progressivism on a society burdened by religious intolerance, monarchic oppression, and moral bankruptcy from the feudal elite. Works like *Candide* and *The Spirit of (the) Laws* created fertile ground for independent thought, intellectual freedom, and the highly esteemed liberty, which every man and woman longed for. The Age of Enlightenment bore witness to the French Revolution and the abolition of the old system of French monarchy, replacing it with one that had more of a constitutional flavor. Literature played a key role in this period, shaping public opinion while also crafting a uniquely French ideal that worked to secure freedom of expression.

The trials and tribulations of the revolutionary age coupled with the near-immediate succession of the Napoleonic era catalyzed a revival of Romanticism. French society had seen rapid transformations over four decades and the social paradigms were warping in response to numerous stressors exerted by geopolitical, cultural, and technological stimuli synthesized by the Industrial Revolution. The people yearned for hope, color, and higher spiritual ideals of personal destiny. Works of French cultural peculiarity and uniqueness are best characterized in the works of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo. The rich palettes of moral uprightness, liberty, and passion to chart one's destiny in a chaotic period are palpable in *Les Misérables* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

The rapid industrialization of France and the rest of Western Europe pushed literary work into a new phase, triggering the transition to a period portrayed by realism, naturalism, and symbolism. Critiques of the bourgeoisie and disillusionment with materialist endeavors were rampant, as masses of the French populace toiled away in coal mines, factories, or the mushrooming industries across France. Social issues were arrayed for public consumption with personages like Emile Zola and Gustave Flaubert knitting together complex themes to communicate ideals like workers' rights and societal shallowness.

The cultural transformation continued throughout the rest of the 19th century, with French poets and writers reflecting deeply on numerous political developments such as the rise of a hostile neighbor—The Prussian Empire—alongside dealing with uniquely native issues within France. Poets such as Rimbaud preferred seeking the mysterious and subconscious undercurrents, often explored through rich poetry based on an approach centered on symbolism. The movement essentially reflected an intent to experiment with artistic themes before the ever-changing cogs of time transitioned to the pre-World War I era. Authors like Marcel Proust preferred writing about Parisian high culture, which had evolved through a period of political complexity but had also been the product of Industrial Era prosperity. Elegance and a focus on refinement defined the literature of the period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, drawing focus to France's commitment to artistic and cultural excellence. Moral debates and the questioning of social conventions continued, however, and remained a key theme in pre-war France until the nation would inevitably be dragged into the gruesome conflict, which would shake its conscience and deplete its resources.

Unease, Invasion, and Postmodernism: Transitioning to the Contemporary Age

French literary culture has evolved consistently since the close of the Second World War, integrating numerous multicultural elements and globalist symbolisms.

The Treaty of Versailles following the First World War imbued a sense of victory in the Allies. However, the jubilant mood would soon turn to the morosely tense period of the Great Depression. This was quickly shunted out by the anxiety instigated by a rising Nazi Germany, often engaged in aggressive posturing and signaling resurgent military might. This period was still greatly influenced by Marcel Proust's works such as *In Search of Lost Time*, alongside works based on surrealist themes. André Breton's *The Surrealist Manifesto* brought forth French society's admiration of avant-garde themes despite having recently recovered from a period of monumental suffering. The subconscious, its impact on everyday lives, and dream-like environs were indicative of French society heaving a brief sigh of relief. Works like *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis Ferdinand-Céline also reflected French consciousness surrounding violent events such as war, colonialism, and oppression. Pessimism and bleak hopelessness were not completely absent from the French psyche and the catastrophe of the First World War was still fresh.

Relief would be temporary, for the Second World War broke out not long after the Great Depression took root in France. The war witnessed the invasion of France by Nazi Germany and the establishment of what historians now call Vichy France. A patently dark period associated with grief, humiliation, and an attack on French identity, the literature of this era gave birth to the famous absurdist writings of Sartre and Camus. Drawing from earlier existentialist thinkers, French existentialist philosophers added a native yet relatable flavor to the commonly explored themes of life's meaning, humanity's existence and its moral ambiguities, and the notion of resilience against an external enemy. Following the cessation of hostilities and victory in the West, France's literary tradition broke away from past themes and notions. The new age was filled with hope for a war-free future, but French thinkers continued to examine the human condition. The period was also marked by the progressive end of French colonial rule across the world, with the nation's various holdings in Asia and Africa gaining independence. Authors like Nathalie Sarraute explored intervening periods between opposites in her work *Between Life and Death*.

The postmodern era was encapsulated perfectly by French writers like Foucault who traversed diverse themes primarily emphasizing knowledge, its dissemination, and theories of power. His impact on global literature has been significant and reaffirmed France's position as a nation of exemplary cultural output. Other authors like Roland Barthes drew public attention to everyday symbols and their deeper implications. Contributors of this era expressed thoughtful and deeply perceptive French identities, which often seemed reflective as well as progressive at the same time. Critical thinking and analytical mastery remained paramount as French literature moved on to the current era. Francophone writing and themes about a multicultural French identity took the front seat, with plots expressing numerous overtones of inclusivity and diverse identities that came to reside within the French fold. Authors like Tahar Ben Jelloun grew to become prominent writers of the contemporary age, often dealing with elements of French society and its reactions to an increasingly globalized world.

Looking Ahead

The numerous phases of French literary metamorphoses have led to the development of a uniquely native yet Western European notion of various elements through the ages. Whether it's the Old French *Chansons de Geste* or the modern novellas exploring themes of diversity, French identity has undergone several iterations of change, often influenced by the literature the nation and the French speakers produced. Regardless, the literary culture of the French people has been one filled with vigor and original thought, reflecting the region's fierce adherence to individualism and free thinking.

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