

French Symbolism

Introduction to French
symbolists
Baudelaire



Main themes

- * 1) Poetry as a revelation of the mystery that surrounds reality
- * 2) The voyant poets who discovers the unknown, that is perceivable through illuminations (Rimbaud)
- * 3) The renewal of the expression: word-revelation, word-music, use of the analogy and of the symbol.



- * In literature symbolism was an aesthetic movement which developed in the late 19th century; its manifesto was published by Jean Moréas in “Le Figarò” on September 18, 1886.
- * The most important statement of symbolist aesthetics, however, was Mallarmé’s “Divagations” (1897); although the symbolists didn’t adhere to a uniform doctrine, they recognised their precursors in Charles Baudelaire and his theory of the correspondences between the senses, in the poetics of Poe, in Wagner’s ideas of a synthesis of the arts, in Schopenhauer’s formula “the world is my idea”.
- * Symbolism was a manifestation of Hegel’s philosophy of idealism. Symbolists believed that the world perceived through the senses was reflection of the spiritual universe. Therefore the poem became a means to metaphysical knowledge. This is why many of them experimented with free verse.



- * Symbolism in England had its most representative and influential poets in the early 20th century. William Butler Yeats gave the symbol a visionary dimension and in his later works changed the concept of symbol to that of “image”. T.S.Eliot replaced direct statement with metaphor and symbol inviting the reader to face the enigma of the poem.
- * Among American writers Emily Dickinson created a poetry endowed with a visionary quality aiming at a metaphysical tension towards the infinite.
- * It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that the influence of Symbolism could be traced in the works by Gabriele D’Annunzio and Giovanni Pascoli.

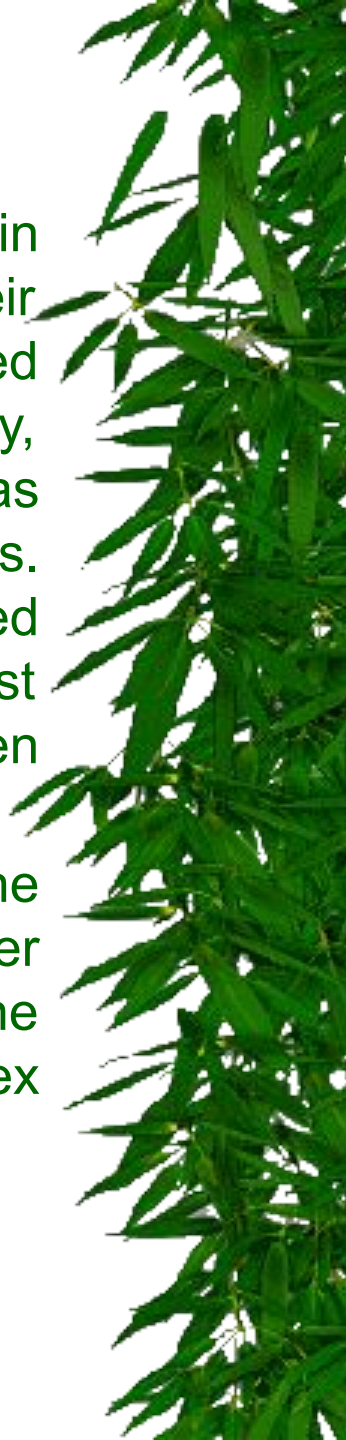


- * Responding to the Realist movement, these poets believed that words cannot adequately express reality, thus, the artist must recreate reality through symbols to express what is seen or felt. This construction of ideas not only described the world through new eyes, but also uncovered the complex layers of darkness and light in everyday life.

- * These Symbolists retained thematic commonalities in their works which included:
 - Life as an artist.
 - Questioning authority.
 - Life in Paris.
 - Primal lust.
 - Darkness.
 - Vampirism and blood.
 - Death.
 - Urban life.
 - Poet as a painter or musician.



- * Realism had become a strong literary and artistic movement in the early 19th Century. "Realists" sought to write or paint their subjects based on empirical fact. The observer expressed reality as it occurred. During the mid- to late 19th Century, primarily in Paris, there came forth a group known as Symbolists who challenged the Realist thought process. Responding to the Realist movement, these poets believed that words cannot adequately express reality, thus, the artist must recreate reality through symbols to express what is seen or felt.
- * These symbols were not made to be entirely cohesive, the focus was more on the pattern which the words together created. This construction of ideas not only described the world through new eyes, but also uncovered the complex layers of darkness and light in everyday life.



Baudelaire

- * Charles Baudelaire was a 19th century French poet, translator, and literary and art critic whose reputation rests primarily on “Les Fleurs du mal”; (1857; “The Flowers of Evil”) which was perhaps the most important and influential poetry collection published in Europe in the 19th century. Similarly, his “Petits Poèmes en prose” (1868; “Little Prose Poems”) was the most successful and innovative early experiment in prose poetry of the time.



- * Known for his highly controversial, and often dark poetry, as well as his translation of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire's life was filled with drama and strife, from financial disaster to being prosecuted for obscenity and blasphemy.
- * Long after his death many look upon his name as representing depravity and vice: others see him as being the poet of modern civilization, seeming to speak directly to the 20th century.



- * In his often introspective poetry, Baudelaire revealed himself as a seeker of God without religious beliefs, searching in every manifestation of life for its true significance, be it in the leaves of a tree or a prostitutes frown. His refusal to admit restriction in the poets choice of theme and his assertion of the poetic power of symbols makes Baudelaire appealing to modern man, as a poet and a critic.
- * Baudelaire was an only child of François Baudelaire and his younger second wife whom he had married in 1819, Caroline Defayis. François had begun a career as a priest, but left the holy orders in 1793 to become a prosperous middle-ranking civil servant. Being a modestly talented poet and painter, he instilled an appreciation for the arts in his son. The younger Baudelaire would later refer to as "the cult of images."



- * Baudelaire's father died in February of 1827. Baudelaire and his mother lived together on the outskirts of Paris from this point. In writing to her in 1861, referring to this time, he wrote "I was forever alive in you; you were solely and completely mine."
- * This time together ended when Caroline married a career soldier named Jacques Aupick, who rose to the position of General and later served as French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and Spain before becoming a senator under the Second Empire.



- * Baudelaire began his education at the Collège Royal in Lyons when Aupick was posted there, transferring to the prestigious Lycée Louis-le-grand when the family returned to Paris in 1836. It was during this time that Baudelaire began to show promise as a student and a writer.
- * He began to write poems, which were not well received by his masters, who felt that was an example of precocious depravity, adopting affections that they deemed unsuited to his age. Moods of intense melancholy also developed and Baudelaire began to see himself as being solitary by nature. In April 1839 he was expelled from school due to his consistent acts of indiscipline.

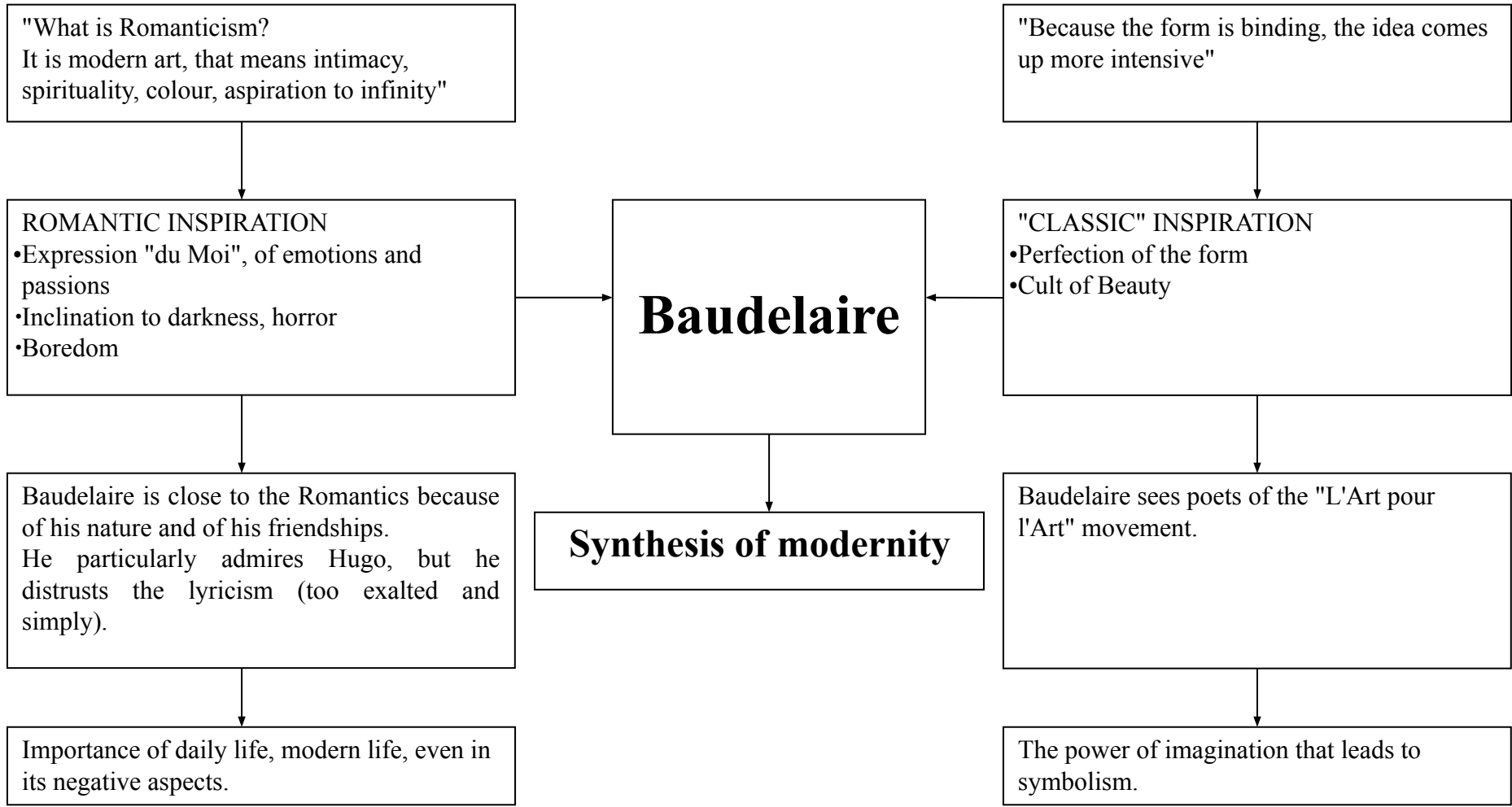


- * **Eventually Baudelaire became a nominal student of law at the École de Droit. In reality, he was actually living a "free life" in the Lattin Quarter. Here he made his first contacts in the literary world, and also contracted the venereal disease that eventually took his life.**
- * **In an attempt to draw his stepson away from the company he was keeping, Aupick sent him on a voyage to India in June of 1841. Baudelaire jumped ship in Mauritius and eventually made his way back to France in February of 1842. The voyage and his exploits after jumping ship enriched his imagination, and brought a rich mixture of exotic images to his work.**
- * **Baudelaire received his inheritance in April 1842 and rapidly proceeded to dissipate it on the lifestyle of a dandified man of letters, spending freely on clothes, books, paintings, expensive food and wines, and, not least, hashish and opium, which he first experimented with in his Paris apartment at the Hôtel Pimodan on the Île Saint-Louis between 1843 and 1845.**



- * Baudelaire met the mulatto woman known as Jeanne Duval, who, first as his mistress and then, after the mid-1850s, as his financial charge, was to dominate his life for the next 20 years. Jeanne would inspire Baudelaire's most anguished and sensual love poetry, her perfume and, above all, her magnificent flowing black hair provoking such masterpieces of the exotic-erotic imagination as "La Chevelure" ("The Head of Hair").
- * Baudelaire's continuing extravagance exhausted half his fortune in two years. In September 1844 his family imposed on him a legal arrangement that restricted his access to his inheritance and effectively made of him a legal minor.
- * The modest annual allowance henceforth granted him was insufficient to clear his debts, and the resulting state of permanently straitened finances led him to still greater emotional and financial dependence on his mother and also exacerbated his growing detestation of his stepfather. The agonizing moods of isolation and despair that Baudelaire had known in adolescence, and which he called his moods of "spleen," returned and became more frequent.





Les fleurs du mal (1857)

- * In its final version (1861), Les fleurs du mal was made of 129 poems. Each of these poems is a crystallization of his vision, and his criticism is a meditation on the nature of a work of art and on the principles that underline it.
- * Baudelaire believed that every great creative artist must in the end become also a critic; his criticism explains his poetry, and his poetry is an extension of his aesthetic theory.



- The failure of *Les fleurs du mal*, from which he had expected so much, was a bitter blow to Baudelaire, and the remaining years of his life were darkened by a growing sense of failure, disillusionment, and despair.
- The work, the ability in using language, the search for the formal perfection interest him.
- It's true that Baudelaire didn't make innovations in poetical form (he often used sonnets).
- Modernity comes from the meeting of the fleeting, the temporary and the eternal. It can be recognizes in pictorial or poetical works.



- * Thanks to metaphor, the poet can establish some contacts among different elements. These connections are based on sensations and imagination.
- * The nature is represented as a mysterious space full of symbols that men are not able to decode.
- * The voyage theme can be often found in Baudelaire: real voyage fed on exotic souvenirs or imaginary voyage to escape from the horrors of the world.
- * Baudelaire wavers between a spiritual voyage towards the Ideal and the temptation of a definitive voyage to Death.



Structure of “Les Fleurs du Mal”

- * “Spleen et Ideal”: men become aware of Ennui (anxiety) in front of the real world; there is a continuous oscillation between the aspiration to the Ideal (through love, poetry) and the relapses in the spleen (that is, according to tradition, the organ responsible of provoking “la bile noir” e la “melancolie”; the author uses this metaphor to represents his nausea in front of life).
- * “Tableaux Parisiens”: Description of the modern city and of the sufferings of people towards who Baudelaire seems to feel a profound compassion.



- * “Le vin”: Escape in drunkenness.
- * “Les Fleurs du mal”: Escape in the artificial paradise.
- * “Révolte”: invocation to Satan.
- * “La Mort”: death seen as last remedy.



Beauty

*Conceive me as a dream of stone:
my breast, where mortals come to grief,
is made to prompt all poets' love,
mute and noble as matter itself.*

*With snow for flesh, with ice for heart,
I sit on high, an unguessed sphinx
begrudging acts that alter forms;
I never laugh, I never weep.*

*In studious awe the poets brood
before my monumental pose
aped from the proudest pedestal,
and to bind these docile lovers fast
I freeze the world in a perfect mirror:
The timeless light of my wide eyes.*



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