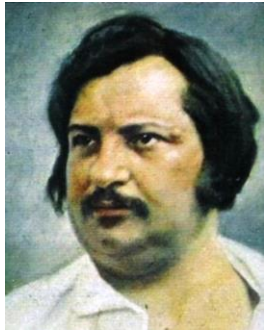




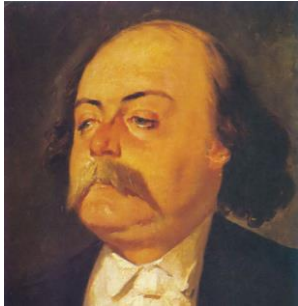
Stendhal (1783-1842)

By Olof Johan Södermark, Public Domain, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Stendhal.jpg>



Balzac (1799-1850)

By Louis-Auguste Bisson, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor%C3%A9_de_Balzac#/media/File:Honor%C3%A9_de_Balzac_\(1842\)_Detail.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honor%C3%A9_de_Balzac#/media/File:Honor%C3%A9_de_Balzac_(1842)_Detail.jpg)



Flaubert (1821-1880)

By Eugène Giraud, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=192153>



Zola (1840-1902)

By Edouard Manet, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edouard_Manet_049.jpg

MASTERPIECES OF FRENCH REALIST FICTION

HUMANITIES SEMINAR

FALL 2017

TUESDAYS

OCTOBER 3- DECEMBER 12

RUBEL ROOM, POETRY CENTER

MARIE-PIERRE LE HIR

PROFESSOR OF FRENCH

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH AND ITALIAN

I. Course Description

Our study of French masterpieces of realist fiction is set in the context of the changing relations between culture and power in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The realist novel is a cultural artefact specific to the nineteenth-century, a genre born with the modern nation-state at a time when (relative) freedom of expression allowed for the rapid expansion and democratization of a public sphere that had emerged in France in the second half of the eighteenth century and played a central role in the onset of the Revolution. It is hard for us to imagine what it must have meant to learn to act as an autonomous individual instead of as a cog in a social pyramid defined by rank. But this is the learning process these writers and their characters had to go through, the process they were keen on describing in their novels as they tested and challenged their newly won social and political freedom.

The novels studied in this course are thematically focused on young men's struggles to succeed in a democratized society, i.e., to reap the revolutionary promise of freedom, fraternity, and equality. Ambition is a common thread in these works, but so are of course the themes of love, money, and social connections, configured sometimes as promoting sometimes as hindering success. As they experience breakthroughs and setbacks, characters can only ask themselves: what is true success? What does it really mean to be fulfilled as an individual? What is the road to human happiness? All questions of primary interest to us today, and no longer only to young men, but to young women as well.

By giving voice and shape to the socio-political aspirations of the young male population in France, the novel responded to the needs of an increasingly large reading public that faced the same dilemmas and recognized itself in it. As a cultural artefact, the realist novel is inextricably linked to the development of the press: indeed, most novels first appeared in installments in newspapers.

But if, in that regard, realist fiction functions as a "mirror" of society, it is at the same time also an art form. Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola, viewed literature as a unique form of expression, as a cultural product that cannot be treated simply as a commodity or reduced to a "message" of any kind—religious, social, or political, for instance.

Our course therefore takes two parallel and complementary paths of inquiry: on the one hand, the realist works provides us with a fictional sociology of everyday life at key moments of the nineteenth-century, with each political regime representing a particular stage in the implementation of the revolutionary legacy; on the other hand, these novels also testify to their author's apprehensions about the fate of culture in the modern age of democracy and capitalism. Our goal is to investigate these writers' struggles with the modern world in which they lived—with the issues of individualism and nationhood, for instance—but also to examine the claims they made about the specificity of their practices as artists and writers.

The course takes us from the beginning of the 19th century, when Stendhal, as a modern, but isolated writer, first described this conflict, to its end, when, at the time of the Dreyfus affair, Zola, as an intellectual capitalizing on his fame as a writer, was able to mobilize a large group of writers, artists, and academics in the name of truth and justice. In other words, it retraces the different phases of the process that led to the relative autonomy of intellectuals as a group, to their relative independence from instances of "external legitimation"—i.e. political, religious, and economic power.

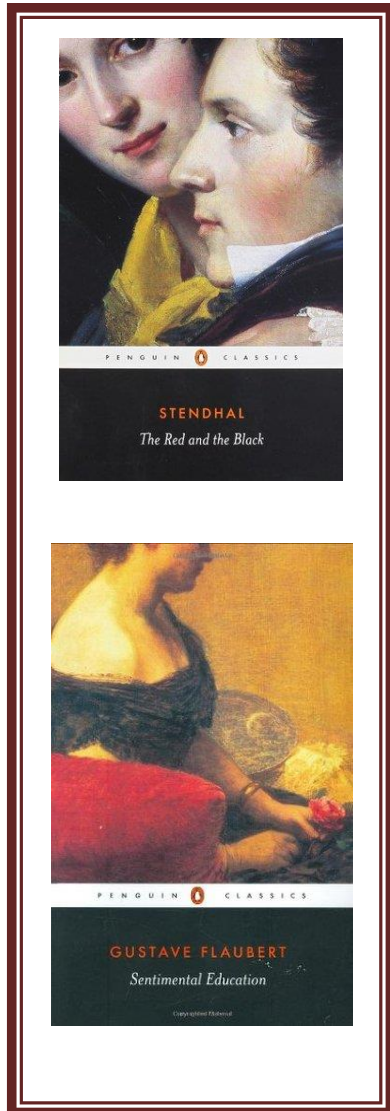
Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola understood that freedom of expression creates a market-place of ideas, or to paraphrase Karl Marx, that in a world dominated by competing interests, the powerful ideas are those of the powerful. In their eyes, therefore, the specific value of literature was to represent a

disinterested form of expression, the product of their intellectual integrity and autonomy, what we would call “cultural” or “intellectual capital” today.

- Stendhal’s work documents an unusually keen and early understanding of the new dangers political liberty brings along: for him, democracy is a great thing, but paradoxically also a threat to free thought and to culture in general. In the 1820s, he wrote two pamphlets in direct response to what he viewed as the most pernicious obstacles to true freedom of expression: first, in *Racine and Shakespeare*, the power of old state-sponsored institutions (such as the French academy or the French Comedy) that fought against any kind of innovation; and second, “*charlatanisme*,” the world of publishing’s tendency to give considerable more weight and importance to trends and fashion than to serious thought. With its focus on Restoration France, a period Stendhal viewed as throwback to the pre-revolutionary past, *Le Rouge et le Noir* testifies to the novelist’s desire to reconcile beauty and culture on the one hand, with political freedom and progress on the other.
- In *Illusions perdues*, Balzac’s analysis of French culture and society in the age of semi-democracy is very similar to Stendhal’s. Focused on the Romantic theme of social advancement in post-revolutionary France, and in particular on the world of letters as an avenue of social mobility, the novel examines the material changes affecting the literary field in the 1820s and early 1830s and in particular the tension between a commercial world of letters (journalism, book publishing, popular theater—all areas with a strong connection to the world of money and politics) and the more ascetic *cénacles*, or writers and artists workshops, that proclaimed their autonomy from it. Based on his experience as a writer living solely by his pen, that is, as someone dependent on the cultural industry he nonetheless criticized, Balzac developed a disenchanted view of modernity and democracy. Emphasizing the new servitudes of his age, he longed for what appeared to him as the simpler world of the Old Regime where genius and talent were, he thought, granted fuller recognition.
- Founded on the principle of art for art’s sake Flaubert’s work represents the most radical break imaginable with the cultural industry. Moving even further away from instances of exterior legitimation as Stendhal, Flaubert famously claimed that his 1857 novel *Madame Bovary* was a book about nothing, *un livre sur rien*, by which he meant that the only thing that mattered in a novel was its “form.” With Flaubert, the writer’s focus shifts from the defining traits of the realist novel according to Stendhal and Balzac (social commentary and authorial voice) to style and narrative techniques. The writer’s craft, his performance as a stylist, become the hallmark of literature. As Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of *Sentimental Education* in *The Rules of Art* shows, the Flaubertian novel testifies not only to the author’s disdainful rejection of *bourgeois* France but also to a very high degree of autonomy on the part of the cultural producer. In more than one way, Frédéric Moreau’s inability and/or unwillingness to fit into society in *Sentimental Education*, in spite of his luck and the numerous opportunities available to him, echoes own Flaubert’s refusal to lead a conventional life.
- Zola’s work represents the last stage of our investigation of the progressive emancipation of the cultural field from the powers that be. For most critics today Zola’s defense of Alfred Dreyfus represents an important political event: a public stand for truth and justice in the face of the government’s bigotry and antisemitism. For Bourdieu, however, it is also a very important cultural event, namely, the invention of the intellectual. For him, Zola’s ability to mobilize writers and artists against antisemitism and for truth and justice is an indication of the relative autonomy of the cultural field at that particular moment in time: it signals the successful transfer of values that had become common currency in the cultural field to the

political arena, and therefore also, the intellectuals' ability to oppose values specific to their own field, cultural capital, to the socially accepted and dominant forms of capital, namely economic and political capital. For our purpose, Zola's *L'oeuvre*, a novel focused on a failed painter, is interesting in yet another regard: by thematizing the rivalry between the pen and the brush, it points to the constitution of the literary field as distinct from the world of art.

III. Primary texts

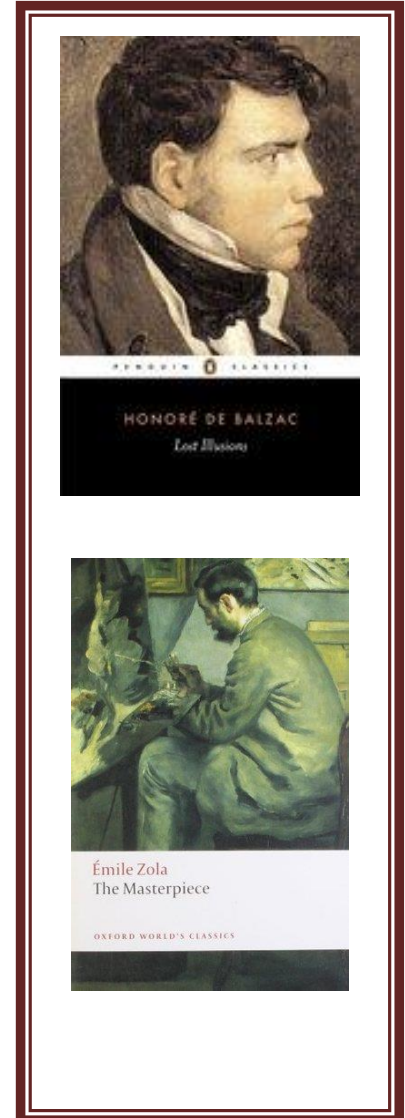


Stendhal (Henri Beyle), *The Red and the Black*. (1830). Ed. And trans. by Roger Gard. Penguin Classics, 2002.

Balzac, Honoré de. *Lost Illusions*. (1836). Trans. By Herbert J. Hunt. Penguin Classics, 2004.

Flaubert, Gustave, *Sentimental Education*. (1869). Ed. by Geoffrey Wall; transl. by Robert Baldick. Penguin Classics, 2004.

Zola, Emile. *The Masterpiece*. (1886). Ed. By Roger Pearson; transl. by Thomas Walton. Oxford World's Classics, 2008.



Masterpieces of French Realist Fiction	Course Overview
1. <i>Tuesday, October 3</i>	French history and culture : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1789 Revolution to 1830 2. Stendhal : life and works 3. <i>The Red and the Black</i> : topics and themes
2. <i>Tuesday, October 10</i>	Stendhal, <i>The Red and the Black</i> : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Book 1 : pages 9-240. 2. Book 2 : pages 243-532. 3. Secondary sources : discussion
3. <i>Tuesday, October 17</i>	French history and culture : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The July Monarchy 1830-1848 2. Balzac : Life and works 3. <i>Lost Illusions</i>: topics and themes
4. <i>Tuesday, October 24</i>	Balzac, <i>Lost Illusions</i> I and II <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Two Poets 2. A Great Man in Embryo 3. Secondary Sources: discussion
5. <i>Tuesday, October 31</i>	Balzac, <i>Lost Illusions</i> III (An Inventor's Tribulations) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. History of a Law-Suit 2. The Fatal Member of the Family 3. Secondary Sources : discussion
6. <i>Tuesday, November 7</i>	French History and Culture : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Second Republic and Second Empire (1848-1871) 2. Flaubert : Life and Works 3. <i>Sentimental Education</i> : topics and themes
7. <i>Tuesday, November 14</i>	Flaubert, <i>Sentimental Education</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Part I (-109) 2. Part II (113-306) 3. Part III (307-460)
8. <i>Tuesday, November 28</i>	On Flaubert <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pierre Bourdieu on <i>Sentimental Education</i> 2. On Flaubert's realism 3. Flaubert's stylistic and narrative techniques
9. <i>Tuesday, December 5</i>	French History and Culture : <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Third Republic 2. Zola : Life and Works 3. <i>The Masterpiece</i> : topics and themes
10. <i>Tuesday, December 12</i>	Zola, <i>The Masterpiece</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chapters 1-5 2. Chapters 6-11 3. Secondary Sources : discussion