

Joris-Karl Huysmans

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Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans (February 5, 1848 – May 12, 1907) was a French novelist who published his works as **Joris-Karl Huysmans**; he is most famous for the novel *À rebours*. His style is remarkable for its idiosyncratic use of the French language, wide-ranging



Joris-Karl Huysmans.

vocabulary, wealth of detailed and
sensuous description, and biting,

satirical wit. The novels are also noteworthy for their encyclopaedic documentation, ranging from the catalogue of decadent Latin authors in *À rebours* to the discussion of the symbology of Christian architecture in *La Cathédrale*. Huysmans' work expresses a disgust with modern life and a deep pessimism, which led the author first to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer then to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

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Parents and early life

He was born in Paris to a Dutch father, Godfried Huysmans, who was a lithographer by trade. His mother, Malvina Badin, had been a schoolmistress. He published his works as "Joris-Karl Huysmans", using an approximation of the Dutch equivalent of his forenames, to emphasize his roots.

Huysmans' father died when he was eight years old, and his mother quickly remarried, leaving Huysmans feeling a great deal of resentment against his stepfather, Jules Og, a Protestant who was part owner of a Parisian book-bindingery.

Huysmans' school years were unhappy but he obtained a baccalauréat. For thirty-two years, he worked as a civil servant for the French Ministry of the Interior, a job he found insufferably tedious. The young Huysmans was called up to fight in the Franco-Prussian War, but

was invalidated out with dysentery, an experience he described in his early story *Sac au dos (Backpack)* (later included in *Les Soirées de Médan*).

Writing career

His
first

French literature

By category

French literary history

Medieval

16th century - 17th century

18th century - 19th century

20th century - Contemporary

French Writers

Chronological list
Writers by category
Novelists - Playwrights
Poets - Essayists
Short story writers

France Portal
Literature Portal

major publication was a collection of prose poems, heavily influenced by Baudelaire, called *Le drageoir à épices* (1874). They attracted little attention but already revealed flashes of the author's distinctive style.

Huysmans followed it with *Marthe, Histoire d'une fille* (1876). The story of a young

prostitute, it was much closer to Naturalism and brought him to the attention of Emile Zola. His next works were in a similar vein: sombre, realistic and filled with minutely detailed evocations of Paris, the city Huysmans knew intimately. *Les Soeurs Vatard* deals with the lives of women in a bookbindery. *En Ménage* is an account of a writer's failed marriage (Huysmans himself never married, but had a long-term lover called Anna Meunier). The climax of this early period is the novella *À vau-l'eau* (*Downstream or With the Flow*), the story of a downtrodden clerk,

Monsieur Folantin, and his heroic and futile quest for a decent meal.

This was followed by Huysmans' most famous novel *À rebours* (*Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*) (1884), which featured a single character, the aesthete des Esseintes, and decisively broke from Naturalism, becoming the ultimate example of "decadent" literature. *À rebours* gained further notoriety as an exhibit during the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895, during which the prosecutor referred to the novel as a "sodomitical" book. The book also appalled Zola, who felt it had

dealt a "terrible blow" to Naturalism. Huysmans began to drift away from the Naturalists and found new friends among the Symbolist and Catholic writers whose work he had praised in *À rebours*, including Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Villiers de L'Isle Adam and Léon Bloy. Stéphane Mallarmé was so pleased with the publicity his verse had received from the novel that he dedicated one of his most famous (and most obscure) poems, *Prose pour des Esseintes* to its hero.



Huysmans' grave.

Huysmans' next novel, *En rade*, a highly unromantic account of a summer spent in the country, was relatively unsuccessful commercially. In 1891, the

publication of *Là-Bas* (*Down There*) attracted considerable attention for its depiction of Satanism in late 1880s France. The book introduced the character Durtal, a thinly disguised portrait of the author. The later Durtal novels, *En Route* (1895), *La Cathédrale* (1898) and *L'Oblat* (1903), trace Durtal/Huysmans' conversion to Roman Catholicism. *En Route* depicts Durtal's spiritual struggle during his stay at a Trappist monastery. *La Cathédrale* finds the protagonist at Chartres, making an intense study of the cathedral and its symbolism. In *L'Oblat*, Durtal

becomes a Benedictine oblate,
finally reaching an acceptance of
the suffering in the world.

Huysmans was also known for his
art criticism: *L'Art moderne*
(1883) and *Certains* (1889). He
was an early advocate of
Impressionism, as well as an
admirer of such artists as Gustave
Moreau and Odilon Redon. He
was a founding member of the
Académie Goncourt.

Huysmans was made a Chevalier
de la Légion d'honneur in 1892,
but only for his work with the
civil service. In 1905, his admirers
persuaded the French government

to promote him to Officier de la Légion d'honneur in view of his literary achievements. In the same year, Huysmans was diagnosed with cancer of the mouth. Joris-Karl Huysmans died in 1907 and was interred in the Cimetière de Montparnasse, Paris.

Quotations about Huysmans' style

Barbaric in its profusion, violent in its emphasis, wearying in its splendor, it is - especially in regard to things seen - extraordinarily expressive, with

all the shades of a painter's palette. Elaborately and deliberately perverse, it is in its very perversity that Huysmans' work - so fascinating, so repellent, so instinctively artificial - comes to represent, as the work of no other writer can be said to do, the main tendencies, the chief results, of the Decadent movement in literature. (Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature")

...Continually dragging Mother Image by the hair or the feet down the wormeaten staircase of Syntax. (Léon Bloy, quoted in

Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans*)

It is difficult to find a writer whose vocabulary is so extensive, so constantly surprising, so sharp and yet so exquisitely gamey in flavour, so constantly lucky in its chance finds and in its very inventiveness. (Julien Gracq)

Selected works

- *Le drageoir aux épices* (1874)
- *Marthe* (1876)
- *Les Sœurs Vatard* (1879)
- *Croquis Parisiens* (1880)

- *En ménage* (1881)
- *À vau-l'eau* (1882)
- *L'art moderne* (1883)
- *À rebours* (1884)
- *En rade* (1887)
- *Là-bas* (1891)
- *En route* (1895)
- *La cathédrale* (1898)
- *La magie en Poitou. Gilles de Rais.* (1899) (see Gilles de Rais)
- *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam* (1901) (see Lydwine de Schiedam)
- *l'Oblat* (1903)
- *Les foules de Lourdes* (1906)
- *Trois Églises et trois Primitifs* (1908)

Bibliography

Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (1955, new edition revised by Brendan King, 2006)

External links

- Joris Karl Huysmans
- Joris Karl Huysmans
- Works by Joris-Karl Huysmans at Project Gutenberg
 - *Against The Grain* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, Project Gutenberg ebook (Also known

as *À Rebours* or
Against Nature)

- *Là-bas* (*Down There*)
by J. K. Huysmans,
Project Gutenberg
ebook (Also known
as *The Damned*)
- *The Cathedral* by J.
K. Huysmans, Project
Gutenberg ebook
- Eamon's Bookmark: *Là-bas*
- *Catholic Encyclopedia*
entry on Huysmans
- *The Word-Painter of Paris*
by Colin Wilson

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