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| Céline, Louis Ferdinand (1894–1964) |
| Louis-Ferdinand Auguste Destouches |
| Louis-Ferdinand Céline was one of the most controversial and innovative authors of the twentieth century. Known for his use of insults, slang, and ellipses in hallucinatory narratives, Céline became a central figure of modernism in interwar France. He gained notoriety from his first novels, *Voyage* *au bout de la nuit* (1932) and *Mort à Crédit* (1936), which examine modern warfare as well as everyday suffering in French society. Following WWII, Céline’s anti-Semitic pamphlets and collaboration with the Nazis caused many to reject his inventive novels and to question his place in the French literary canon. Nevertheless, Céline’s unique style of writing and his innovative storytelling have permanently influenced the modern literary landscape. Early Life Born Louis-Ferdinand Auguste Destouches in 1894, Céline spent his childhood in Paris. After his early studies, Céline spent time in both Germany and England before returning to France to become a jeweler’s apprentice. In 1912 he joined the 12e regiment de Cuirassiers. However, in 1914, after seeing active battle during WWI for a short time, he received a wound in Flanders for which he would be awarded a military medal and an invalid’s pension of 70%. |
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After his early studies, Céline spent time in both Germany and England before returning to France to become a jeweler’s apprentice. In 1912 he joined the 12e regiment de Cuirassiers. However, in 1914, after seeing active battle during WWI for a short time, he received a wound in Flanders for which he would be awarded a military medal and an invalid’s pension of 70%.  Céline then went to London where, in 1916, he signed up as a commercial agent in the former German colony of Cameroon. After falling ill with malaria he returned to France and earned his baccalaureate in 1919. He then studied medicine in Rennes and in Paris, finishing his thesis in 1923. Céline subsequently travelled with the League of Nations to the U.S. and to West Africa as a medical envoy before finally settling down as a doctor in the Clichy medical clinic in 1927. These events would greatly influence Céline’s later novels, which seem to draw from his experiences. Beginnings of his Literary Career In 1932, Louis-Ferdinand Destouches published *Voyage au bout de la nuit* under the pseudonym Céline, and won the prix Théophraste-Renaudaut. A semi-autobiographical account of Céline’s life — from his enlistment in WWI until his time as a doctor in Clichy — *Voyage* presents a world where identities and locations are uncertain and constantly in flux. Céline launches a critique of this modern world through a nightmarish journey, describing of the inhumanity of modern warfare, the corruption within France’s colonial enterprise, and the vulgarity of America’s capitalist culture. Finally, upon returning to France as a doctor in the poor suburbs of Paris, the protagonist Bardamu discovers that these symptoms are equally rooted within French civilization.  As a sign of this modern decay, the rhythm of Céline’s disjointed prose — scattered with ellipses, exclamation marks, and vulgarities — pushes the possibilities of the novel to extremes. Assaulting the legacy of ‘correct’ French that defined even much experimental French literature well into the twentieth century, *Voyage* is overloaded with foreign influences, rants, obscenities, slang, and insults. This does not mean that *Voyage* encourages a democratization of literature, however. Rather, Céline’s massacre of the French language condemns modern day France, corrupted to the point of vulgarity.  Although *Voyage* was Céline’s most influential novel, many critics see his second novel, *Mort à crédit* (1936), as his masterpiece, both technically and thematically. From the viewpoint of Ferdinand Bardamu, the narrative drifts feverishly into a series of memories and flashbacks to his childhood. Céline addresses the effects of the cult of progress on a section of France who have adapted poorly to new technologies, describing how they struggle with severe indebtedness and moral decay.  *Mort à crédit* creates a direct link between the illness of the body and the degradation of French civilization, describing in detail bodily functions such as vomiting and bleeding. This focus translates directly into Céline’s writing style in boththese early novels. Violently spitting grotesque words and phrases, Céline’s narratives transgress the limits of French academic language. And, in *Mort*, this manipulation of language plays a central role in the initiation of actions. Particularly evident in the heightening verbal exchange of insults between the Ferdinand Bardamu and his father, violent exchanges of words would culminate in an attempted murder on the part of the Ferdinand. Céline’s Anti-Semitism In the years leading up to and during WWII, Céline published several anti-Semitic pamphlets — including *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937), *L’Ecole des cadavres* (1938) and *Les Beaux Draps* (1941) — all of which question the possibility of authentic poetic or creative production in a modern French society. Emphasizing that the survival of the European (‘Aryan’) man and his creative production depended on a war against the foreigner, Céline’s pamphlets identify anti-Semitism as the most complete realization of a political ideology of the poetic.  Considering the absence of overt anti-Semitism in his earlier novels, however, Céline’s pamphlets became an object of contention amongst his contemporaries. His supporters, including Andre Gide, insisted that Céline’s rant against the Jew within his pamphlets was a joke, citing Céline propensity for hyperbole. Alternatively, Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that the disparity between Céline’s novels and his hate-filled pamphlets was due to a difference of form, concluding that the novel could not support anti-Semitic thought.  Although it is debatable whether a clear distinction between Céline’s novels and pamphlets can be made, the anti-Semitic pamphlets — which were popular during Germany’s occupation of France — would forever mar his reputation. In the last days of the war, Céline was forced to flee to Denmark where he was tried for treason in absentia and jailed in 1950. While he was granted amnesty and returned to France in 1951, neither his popularity as an author nor his health would ever be the same again. Return to the Novel and Death Céline returned to the genre of the novel, publishing *Une féerie pour une autre fois* (1952) and *Normance* (1954). These novels were largely ignored due to Céline’s reputation. Nevertheless, in the late fifties he began a new trilogy of novels — *D’un chateau l’autre* (1957), *Nord* (1960) and *Rigodon* (finished in 1961 but published posthumously in 1969) — which narrate his journey through Nazi Germany. These novels were well received by the critics who praised Céline’s ability to allow the reader to experience the last days of WWII in Germany.  Moreover, on the level of style and form, Céline’s last trilogy experimented with the author/reader dynamic. He begins *D’un chateau l’autre* by directly drawing the reader into an intimate conversation (‘Pour parler franc, là entre nous …’). And, as the novels continue, Céline blurs the line between reality and hallucinations. He asks whether one can ever be sure of what is real and what is an illusion, particularly in the modern world of photographic identification and certifications.  On July 1st 1961, only hours after completing the last part of his German trilogy, *Rigodon,* Celine died in his home in Meudon. While Céline struggled with feelings of rejection and poverty during his life, his influence on French literature has been longstanding. While *Voyage* remains Céline’s most influential novel, the influence of his other works can be found in works as diverse as Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierre Le Fou* (1965), Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and the novels of Michel Houellebecq. In 2011, Céline was named to the List of 500 French Cultural Icons to be published in *Le Monde*, only to be removed by François Mitterrand, the Minister of Culture, who cited Celine’s connections to anti-Semitism. Select Works by Céline *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932)  *Mort à Crédit* (1936)  *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (1937)  *L’Ecole des cadavres* (1938)  *Les Beaux Draps* (1941)  *Guignol’s Band I* (1951)  *Une féerie pour une autre fois* (1952)  *Normance* (1954)  *D’un chateau l’autre* (1957)  *Nord* (1960)  *Rigodon* (1961)  *Guignol’s Band II (Le pont de Londres)* (1964) |
| Further reading:  (Alméras)  (Carroll)  (Décarie)  (Green)  (Hafez-Ergaut)  (Kaplan)  (Sanos)  (Sautermeister)  (Tilby)  (Veg) |