



Famous French People

J.K. Huysmans ©

by Robert Shepherd

Hello, you're listening to Robert Shepherd on EnglishWaves.

It's time to hear about the life of a famous novelist whose key books epitomize successive phases of the aesthetic, spiritual and intellectual life of late 19th-century France. He also spent 30 years in the French civil service. His name is Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Born Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans in Paris on 5th February 1848, he was the son of Dutch lithographer Godfried Huysmans.

At the age of 20, J.K. Huysmans started a long career in the Ministry of the Interior, writing many of his novels on official time and on government notepaper.

His early work, *Marthe, histoire d'une fille*, was about his liaison with a *soubrette*. Another was a novella called *Sac au dos* based on his experience in the Franco-German War. However, his 1884 novel *À rebours* is by far his most famous. It relates to the experiments in aesthetic decadence undertaken by the bored survivor of a noble line. Bruce Robinson, the creator of British cult movie *Withnail and I*, once described the book as the funniest he had ever read, saying it influenced much of the script. A copy of the book even appears at the end of the film.

Huysmans' other works include the controversial *Là-bas*, which tells of the occultist revival that occurred in France in the 1880s. The book was clever in that it also introduced what was clearly an autobiographical protagonist, Durtal, who reappeared in Huysmans's last three novels: *En route*, *La Cathédrale* and *L'Oblat*.

Arguably the chief fascination of Huysmans's work is found in its autobiographical content. His novels tell the story of a protracted spiritual odyssey. In each account the hero tries to find happiness in some kind of spiritual and physical escapism; each ends on a note of disappointment and revolt. That's certainly true until *L'Oblat*, in which the hero acknowledges that escapism is not only futile, but wrong.

J.K. Huysmans exemplified his hard-won belief in the value of suffering in his courageous fight during the months of pain that preceded his death from cancer on 12th May 1907. He was buried in Cimetière de Montparnasse in Paris.

Stay tuned to EnglishWaves