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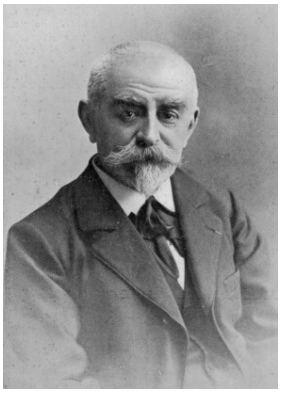

Famous French People

J.K. Huysmans ©

by Robert Shepherd

Vocabulary & pronunciation study by Laurent Dufour©

Words are explained alongside the text

Stressed syllables are underlined and in bold*

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

It's time to hear about the life 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.

novelist (n.) writer of novels, books telling a long story in prose

key (adj.) major, essential

to epitomize (vb.) to be a perfect example of

civil service (n.) organization which runs the administration of a state

Dutch (adj.) relating to the Netherlands, Holland

novella (n.) short novel

by far (exp.) obviously, by a great extent

to relate to (vb.) to be about, be concerned with

line (n.) beings with common ancestry

copy (n.) one of the many books, that are exactly the same and are produced to be sold to the public

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.

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occultist (adj.) relating to the belief in or study and practice of supernatural powers, magic, astrology, etc

revival (n.) renewed acceptance of, or interest in past customs, styles, etc

arguably (adv.) it can be argued or maintained that, possibly

protracted (adj.) prolonged

escapism (n.) tendency to escape from unpleasant reality into day-dreams, fantasy

to acknowledge (vb.) to admit, recognize

*** Tip !**

Note the stress pattern in the adjectives ending in –IAL or in –IC/ICAL :

controversial, official

aesthetic

autobiographical, physical