

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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SAND, GEORGES

Georges Sand and French literature. Georges Sand (1804-1876) was a widely read and discussed French novelist, memoirist, and challenger of social mores. Her flamboyant affairs with literary and artistic figures were widely known, as was a fling with Lesbianism—for all these ‘dubious behaviors’ of the time were heralding a significant new freedom for women.

Georges Sand, the Life. George Sand was born in Paris. Her mother was a commoner, but her father, a grandson of the Marshal General of France, loomed like a beacon of distinction over the family. Georges Sand was raised by her grandmother, primarily at the family estate near Nohant, in the province of Berry. (There she was raised in the spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a lover of nature, a lover of the natural in the human, and no adulator of social structures.) From 1817-1820 she removed to a convent, where her education continued, and she became for a time fervently religious. In 1820 she returned to Nohant, where her fervor began to decline. Two years later she married Baron Dudevant, a coarse but well meaning squire, whom she left in 1831, and whom she later divorced. (She often voiced her scorn for him—scorning his claim to nobility, and mocking his bourgeois habits.) She went back to Paris, where she indulged in what was to be a wide range of affairs with literary, artistic, and musical figures of the day—including Alfred de Musset, Prosper Mérimée, Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and in the end (though perhaps as friend and not lover) with Gustave Flaubert, who greatly admired her. (We speak here of full fledged affairs, not one night stands; for example she spent the winter of 1838-9 on Majorca with Frédéric Chopin, and her own children; until internal squabbling broke the pair apart. She had a good dozen serious affairs, all of which, given her prominence as a writer, at the same time, brought sustained attention onto her; as did a probably Lesbian affair with the for a time extremely popular stage actress, Marie Dorval, with whom Georges Sand collaborated.) To all of these prominent ‘scandalous’ situations Georges Sand added the component of fairly permanent social rebellion. She dressed in men’s clothing, smoked in public—quite a daring act at the time—and engaged actively in politics and social movements. (One of her areas of commitment was to the Fouriériste commune system advocated by many free thinkers in the Paris of the time.) In 1860 she retired to Nohant, where she lived and wrote for the remainder of her life.

Georges Sand, the written work. George Sand’s novels, which are rarely read for pleasure today, fall into four more or less distinct categories: novels of love; novels of political and sociological reform; novels of country life; novels of manners. Although these novels are not popular today, and are too ‘local’ for our tastes, Sand was of considerable importance in her day. She did much to spread the doctrines of social justice and the equality of women, and her novels had a great effect on Russian thought in the last part of the nineteenth century. Although her ideas were generally borrowed ideas, she wrote in her own style—clear and fluid—and lived a life which was considered liberated and liberating.

Reading

Primary source reading

My Life, Georges Sand, tr. Hofstadter, 1979.

Secondary source reading

Szulc, Tad, *Chopin in Paris: the Life and Times of the Romantic Composer*, 1995.

Further reading

Travers, Martin, *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism*, 2006.

Original language reading

Maurois, Andre, *Lelia ou la vie de Georges Sand*, 1985.

Suggested paper topics

Georges Sand may strike us today, more for her lifestyle—which was liberated to the max—than for her fiction, but in her time she was widely read. Read a novel like *Indiana* (1832), and see what you think of the new liberated social world, of her time, as presented by a Romantic woman's discourse.

In your mind pair Mme. de Staél, as a bridge builder but liberated woman, with Georges Sand. What do you see in common between the two women, as inner revolutionaries? What drove both of them to write extensive interior fictions? Are they precursors of the liberated woman of our day? Or of a special kind of modern femme fatale?

Excerpt

<http://en.proverbia.net/citasautor.asp?autor=16419>

There is only one happiness in life -- to love and to be loved.

Faith is an excitement and an enthusiasm: it is a condition of intellectual magnificence to which we must cling as to a treasure, and not squander on our way through life in the small coin of empty words, or in exact and priggish argument.

I regard as a mortal sin not only the lying of the senses in matters of love, but also the illusion which the senses seek to create where love is only partial. I say, I believe, that one must love with all of one's being, or else live, come what may, a life of complete chastity.

Once my heart was captured, reason was out the door, deliberately and with a sort of frantic joy. I accepted everything, I believed everything, without struggle, without suffering, without regret, without false shame. How can one blush for what one adores?

Work is not man's punishment! It is his reward and his strength, his glory and his pleasure.

If they are ignorant, they are despised, if learned, mocked. In love they are reduced to the status of courtesans. As wives they are treated more as servants than as companions. Men do not love them: they make use of them, they exploit them, and expect, in that way, to make them subject to the law of fidelity.

It is sad, no doubt, to exhaust one's strength and one's days in cleaving the bosom of this jealous earth, which compels us to wring from it the treasures of its fertility, when a bit of the blackest and coarsest bread is, at the end of the day's work, the sole recompense and the sole profit attaching to so arduous a toil.