



Préciosite and Dandyism: Ages of Beauty

Curriculum Unit 94.02.06

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During the 17th century there appeared in France a strong literary movement which became characteristic of a new era called “age des Precieuses”. This movement fostered a code of behavior both social and intellectual that spread quickly from the world of the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.

Although this particular style of poetry is today, as it was then considered, by many, to be artificial and snobbish, it has nevertheless gained a place of importance in French literature thanks to the interesting social factors which brought about its birth. What began as a social style became an intellectual movement, fully acknowledged and recognized by the many poets of the time, among them the most celebrated of all, Moliere.

During the first part of the 19th century a new code of behavior spread from England. This became known as Dandyism. The main representative of the movement was a gentleman known by the name of Beau Brummell. He established a code of behavior, especially addressed to men, that had many similarities with “Preciosite”, and I wish to emphasize these similarities without ignoring differences, in order to identify “Preciosite” as a recurrent phase in history.

Some very specific considerations have influenced me in choosing this particular period as a topic for a curriculum unit:

A - Special social events took place during the 17th century in France and during the 19th century in England, events which in turn influenced the adoption of a special code of behavior and, by extension, influenced fashion and literature.

B - The originality, the peculiarity and/or the silliness of these styles can be, after being discussed in different ways, powerful tools to inspire the students, particularly to create poems of their own, in English or in a foreign language.

This unit will therefore:

A - Introduce the Age of the Precieuses and its major exponents.

B - Provide the historical background, explaining issues related just to the 17th century and then to the 19th century.

C - Include examples from the “literature precieuse” and from poetry influenced by Dandyism.

D - Explore the effects of such movements on the society of the time and their close ties with fashions in material culture.

E - Explore the similarities between "Preciosite" and "Dandyism".

Appearance of the "Preciosite"(Figure Available in Print Form) (figure available in print form)

While the adjective "précieux" already existed in the 12th century, it is not much later that it was used with a socially significant meaning. "Preciosite" appeared as a social and cultural movement at the end of "la Fronde", when, after five years of civil war, socially stylish living could be thought of again. One of the original purposes therefore of this cultural movement was to eliminate the vulgarity and the nonchalance in the language and the behavior typical of that time at court and replace them with elegance of manners and of language.

We can trace the acknowledgment of this movement to two significant gents:

- 1 The publication of the "Précieuses," a work by the Abbé de Pure.
2. A letter, dated April 3, 1654, sent by the Chevalier Renaud de Sevigne to the Duchess of Savoy, in which he informed her of the existence of a group of young ladies and women, called "Precieuses", who had devised their own special language.

This special language would lead later on to the publication of more than one special code or dictionary. Among these we can name:

- The Abbé d'Aubignac (1604-1676), author of *Pratique du Théâtre* and of the *Histoire du temps ou la relation du royaume de coqueterie* .
- Maulevrier, author of the *Carte du Royaume des Precieuses* (1658).- Mlle de Scudery, author of the *Carte du Tendre* (1654)

The word *Précieuse* would be, from that time on, used in two different ways: negative and positive. The negative attitude would be shared by writers such as Boileau, Furetiere and Sauval; the positive by the friends of the Abbe d'Aubignac and the court of Gaston d'Orleans and his daughter. Other writers would join the controversy, although in a milder way (the poet Scarron, and St Evrement). The merit, however, of writing the most comprehensive collection concerning the movement including anecdotes and historical materials, must be accorded to Somaize, who wrote the *Grand Dictionnaire des Précieuses* ou *La Clef de la Lanque des Ruelles* (1660-1661). This work has 395 entries, including particular events and works by Mlle de Scudery and Mlle de Monpensier.

Definition of a *Précieuse* The word "Précieuse" is in this case a very abstract term indicating mainly an inner feeling which takes the form of a reaction to the distasteful manners commonly used in the social circles of the 17th century. The ladies of the movement did not want to be considered objects used by men, even in marriage, which they tried to postpone as long as they could, therefore avoiding such consequences as childbearing. Hence, in this respect at least, we can see them as ancestors of certain tendencies in modern feminism. Their "preciosite" was spread first at the salon of the Marquise de Rambouillet, who wanted to

create a cradle of manners where more polished and proper language would also be developed and spread.

For almost fifty years the Hotel de Rambouillet and the famous Chambre bleue (1630-1645 are to be considered its best years) was the place to be for such ladies such as the Duchesse de Longueville, Mme de la Fayette, Mme de Sevigne, the Grande Demoiselle, Mme de Sable and Mlle de Scudery, to whom we owe the *Portrait of a Précieuse*, a portrait modeled on the personality of Mme de Rambouillet. Mme de Rambouillet is also mentioned in the Grand Cyrus where she is disguised under the name of Anacrise, with the following traits: few things and people bring her satisfaction or happiness; she herself does not like people too much, but she is polite and refined; she is, however, so excessively sensitive to the language and the behavior of some gentlemen that they will avoid going where they know she will be present, knowing that she will faint at the sound of an unpleasant word. To fully understand such behavior, we must go back to its causes.

Moliere Jean Baptiste Poquelin, Known as Moliere, could not resist the temptation to write a Play based on this movement: *Les Précieuses ridicules*. Although the author wanted to expose the ridiculous new fashion which many of the ladies of the aristocracy had come to appreciate and follow, he was aware that politically and economically it would be very dangerous to anger that sector of society. Moliere therefore skillfully spread the rumor that the précieuses depicted in the play were not the ones belonging to the salons of Paris, but the one outside the capital. This explanation held some truth in it, as there was even more fun to be had mocking parvenus than mocking established persons, furthermore the same explanation allowed him not only to stage the play on schedule and without interruptions, but also to receive requests for repeated performances at the "hotels" (residences) of the different exponents of the nobility, even if they were part of the societe précieuse. One of the reasons for the success of the play could be that it was not Moliere's intention to judge harshly; rather he wanted to expose certain fashions or fads and let the public draw their own conclusions. *Les Précieuses Ridicules* by Jean Baptiste Poquelin (Moliere) (figure available in print form)

Represented for the first time at the theatre of the Petit-Bourbon on November 18, 1659, this play was an immediate success. The play is built on the theme of two provincial girls, anxious at all cost to be part of the fashionable circle of Paris, who want to act according to the new code of behavior established by the Précieuses. The entertainment comes from the comic contrast between desire and elegance without common sense and pretended knowledge without real culture. Moliere's parody of the language of the Précieuses can be found in sentences such as : "Voiturez ici les commodites de la conversation" ("carriage us here the conveniences of the conversation"). The valets, meanwhile, with no sense of decorum, offer to show their wounds and are actually undressed on stage.

Here is the view of the Précieuses, as Moliere sees it, on the subject of marriage: Mon pere... le mariage ne doit jamais arriver qu'après les autres aventures. Il faut qu'un aimant, pour etre agreable, sache debiter les beaux sentiments, pousser le doux, le tendre, le passionne, et que sa recherche soit dans les formes. Premièrement, il doit voir au temple, ou la promenade, ou dans quelque ceremonie publique, la personne dont il devient amoureux; ou bien etre conduit fatalement chez elle par un parent ou un ami, et sortir de la tout raveur et melanique. Il cache un temps sa passion a l'objet aime, et cependant lui rend plusieurs visites, ou l'on ne manque jamais de mettre sur le tapis une question galante qui exerce les esprits de l'assemblee. Le jour de la declaration arrive, qui se doit faire ordinairement dans uneallee de quelque jardin, tandis que la compagnie s'est un peu eloignee et cette declaration est suivie d'un prompt courroux, qui paralt a notre rougeur et qui, pour un temps, bannit l'aimant de notre presence....

Here is the English translation: My father... marriage must arrive only after other adventures. A lover, in order to be considered pleasant, must express love, expose sweetness, tenderness, passion and that his quest be

made according to propriety. First, he must meet the person he is in love with at a church, or at a promenade, or some public event, or he must be fatally introduced to her by a relative or a friend, and leave the premises all dreaming and melancholic. He hides his passion toward the person loved for a while, nevertheless paying several visits, where he never fails to pose a gallant question to excite the minds of the circle. The day of the declaration arrives, which must be done normally in the path of a garden, while the company is a little far from them. This declaration is followed by a prompt retreat due to our blushing which, for some time, will banish the lover from our presence...

The same characteristics of the Preciosite but this time reversing the role can be found in the society of the 19th century. Men put themselves at the center of attention and rendered prevailing standard of behavior less uncouth and perhaps in some cases more sensitive by stressing a new fashion code and a special mode of behavior. The name of the extraordinary movement who spread from England to the rest of Europe was Dandyism.

Dandyism This word was attached, starting about 1813-1816, to the exquisite and fashionable men of the period. The cradle of this movement, founded about the middle of the 18th century, was the Macaroni Club. Its members were young men of rank who had visited Italy and sought to introduce the southern elegance of manners and dress into England. Their dress code included "white silk breeches, very tight coat and vest, with enormous white silk stockings and diamond-buckled, red heeled shoes.

The politician Charles James Fox was the first exponent, followed by the man who became the supreme dictator of the movement: George Bryan Brummell, known as Beau Brummell, under whose rule the cult of Dandyism became a social force.(figure available in print form)

Before I continue with the exploration of Dandyism, it is important to clarify that the word was used in this sense as early as 1760. Mention of it can be found right under our nose in "Yankee Doodle Dandy" This song was probably sung by Englishmen who wanted to make fun of the appearance of the American troops:

Yankee Doodle came to town,Riding on a pony,Stuck a feather in his cap,And called it Macaroni!

This example suggests that the words "Macaroni and Dandy" were already associated (as in the song and in England) before the founding of the Macaroni Club (founded in 1764 and considered the headquarters of Dandyism). After losing the war, the English also lost the song to the Americans, and what was intended to be an insulting song became a patriotic one, and a testimonial to the irrelevance of allegedly ridiculous provincialism and vulgarity as revealed by costume.

Dandyisme became a widespread social phenomenon during the Regency of the future George IV, when in fact the aristocracy and the monarchy were most despised in England.

What the utilitarian middle class most hated in the nobility was that the court most appreciated in a dandy: an air of superiority, irresponsibility, inactivity. In fact the dandy pretended to be free of all human commitments: morality. passion-ambition. Politics or any sort of occupation. Beau Brummell became the undisputed leader of this movement. He had an entourage of young men whose insolent and affected manners made them universally unpopular and whose main interests were fashion and clothes. They wore: coats of blue or brown cloth with brass buttons, the coat tails almost touching the heels. Their breeches were extremely tight and on their feet they would wear highly polished hessian boots. They wore a very tight waistcoat to ensure a small waist, and a frilled shirt and cravat.(figures available in print form)

Dandyism can be divided into two different periods. In 1822, owing to the influence of Lord Byron's person and poetry, the fashionable man must appear at first glance unhappy and sick. He must also look nonchalant, with a deep and fatal look and lips showing scorn towards humanity. During the second part of his evolution the dandy should have a more conquering air of insolence. He must still take care of his appearance, now sporting a mustache or a goatee. He must show an independent character by the way he wears a hat, and by stretching his legs in front of the ladies. (Rene de Chateaubriand) (figure available in print form)

Maybe the only way to understand what the Dandy represented in England is to explore what the French writers thought he was not: he was not middle-class and drab, not stupid, and especially not trapped in a tedious existence. Because the dandy was a self-made person, he could however be judged ambitious - despite his pretense not to be - or unscrupulous.

The dandy is not generally rich, or at least he cannot compare what he has with the people he likes to surround himself with, but he replaces this lack of means with delicacy and perfection of appearance.

He is not a libertine, but he prefers the company of married women, especially of the high aristocracy.

Beau Brummell was not rich, in keeping to the traditional background of the Dandy, and his rise to power was highly controversial and unconventional.

One of the most recurrent stories about his first encounter with the Prince of Wales, who was later to become King George IV, is that the Prince, being then in company of the Marquise of Salisbury, stopped at a rustic farm for a drink and met the young boy; taken by his appearance, he expressed the desire to meet him again. Brummell became a Captain of the Hussars, but bored by the military life, he moved to London. Under the Prince's protection he became extremely influential in fashionable circles. He was sober but impeccable. The simple act of dressing became, for him, an act of skillful choices, from the tying of the tie to the cut of the gloves. With the awareness of his power came Brummell's impertinence, from which not even the Prince was spared. He was feared for his bons mots as well as for his sharp tongue. Sometimes his jokes were extremely cruel and unmerciful.

Another extremely important dandy was Alfred Guillaume Gabriel, Count d'Orsay.

Trained to Dandyism under George IV's rule and flourishing under William IV and Victoria, he was not only the essential link between the two eras but also the link between France and England. Pride of the aristocracy and friend of virtually every distinguished literary man of his period, he fathered the later literary tradition of Dandyism as Byron had fathered the earlier phase.

Legally his title was Count of France, the title having been bought by his originally bourgeois family. His father, Count Albert, was one of Napoleon's most handsome generals.

Like Brummell, d'Orsay was one of those personalities who received and was schooled to social graces (very early in life) in a salon. With his sister and her husband, the young Duc de Guiche, d'Orsay was invited to England, by Guiche's father, who had been named Ambassador Extraordinary for the coronation of George IV.

Accepted immediately in social circles he sparked the interest of many personalities and became part of the ménage of the Blessington family, who gave him all he could ask: a home, a new country. Another link between eras can be found in the acquaintance with Byron, whom he met through the Blessingtons, and who knew him quite well in Italy. As when during the 17th century, Mme de Rambouillet's blue room was famous,

the Gore House, where the Blessington-d'Orsay salon was held, became just as important. Scholars have viewed it, not as the center of London, but rather as a retreat where writers, artists, journalists, politicians, actors and foreign personalities met. Among them we can list Lamartine, Vigny, Alexander Dumas, and Franz Liszt, just to name a few.

Women did not take to d'Orsay, except, of course, for Jody Blessington. They were disturbed by his air of sexual ambivalence, and many found his costume effeminate. According to Jane Carlyle, "his beauty is of that rather disgusting sort which seems to be ...of no sex". Men were drawn to d'Orsay or occasionally repelled. Either way, they found his dandyism a daring blend of the masculine and feminine graces.

The Dandyism movement in France had several followers, but became an intellectual movement rather than an attitude. Jules Amedee d'Aureville published a volume in praise of Brummell's Dandyism called *Du Dandyisme et de Georges Brummell*. D'Aureville was living in Paris, in 1833, when the rage of Anglomania was at its height. Born in 1808 in the heart of the Cotentin peninsula of Normandy, where plenty of English influences still survived, he fully felt that he belonged to England and France, and that he would therefore emphasize the resemblance's between the two countries. He knew enough of the history of the English Restoration, of the careers and attitudes of eighteenth century beaux, statesmen, novelists, etc., to trace the background of English Dandyism, but in his analysis, Dandyism is considered a spiritual achievement. The art of dressing is not viewed as the need of an exhibitionist but rather the need to be simple and to control, using independent judgment, any aesthetic quality that might give away one's inner feelings. The dandy becomes therefore synonymous with the artist: and art of this kind must shock rather than please. The dandy is independent of the values and pressures of a society in pursuit of money. He does not work, he merely exists; his sexual ambivalence is not a weakness but a strength because it keeps him independent. The transformation of the ideal of Dandyism brought in by Barbey d'Aureville paved the road for the making and the accepting of the poet Charles Baudelaire

Charles Pierre Baudelaire (1821-1867) (figure available in print form)

Born in Paris, Baudelaire traveled abroad, visiting different countries, among them India, which gave him an aura of originality. Very fashionable from the time he entered society, he wore his hair long and wavy, with a full mustache and a dark, curling beard. His dressing code was characterized by the use of black: he liked it as a color and as a negation of all color. His clothes were cut according to his own instructions, a little different from the fashion of that time: trousers slim and buttoned under his shoes, coat unusually long and straight. He would use a dash of color to set off the blackness of his clothes: a red cravat (sang de boeuf) and pale rose gloves or a white cravat and neutral gloves. Later he became more grave and dressed wholly black because he felt that the century he was living in was a century in mourning, moving towards decline rather than progress. He shaved his beard and clipped his hair close to his head, thereby showing that "la perfection de la toilette consiste-t-elle dans la simplicité absolue, qui est, en effet, la meilleure manière de se distinguer". His originality was not a fashionable facade: his costume was his feeling, his private view of the events of the century. He died in Paris after having abused his body physically and mentally. Here is one of his original writings:

L'Etranger Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme enigmatique, dis? Ton pere, ta mere, ta soeur ou ton frere?- Je n'ai ni pere, ni mere, ni soeur, ni frere.

Tes amis?- Vous vous servez la d'une parole dont le sens m'estreste jusqu'a ce jour inconnu.

Ta patrie?- J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est situee.

La beauté?- Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et immortelle.

L'or?- Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.

Eh! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire étranger?- J'aime les nuages...là-bas...là-bas...les merveilleux
DuagesAout 1862

Even if they are not specified openly, it is possible in this poem to find some of the characteristic traits of the dandy. The individual is by his own admission alone, without family or friends, he worships beauty while by the same token he despises money. In the end we have the feeling that there are not too many things that can inspire or move the man or the poet, and in this particular case even beauty is doubtful since it should be loved deliberately (having first been found). Beauty is, however, acknowledged as a goddess ruling over mankind and immortal in her purpose, whatever it may be (relevant to Dandyism because both strive for a high standard of aesthetic forms). Gold, symbol of riches and power, often for hate, because it represents the destruction of integrity and is compared in its power to God, who has the same power of destruction, therefore both of them to be considered negative forces.

The stranger being interviewed is an "extraordinary" stranger, not only because he is unfamiliar to the speaker, but also because his feelings are strange in themselves.

Here is the translation of the poem by Baudelaire:

The Stranger

Who do you love best, enigmatic man, tell? Your father, your mother, your sister or your brother?- I have no father, no mother, no sister, no brother.

Your friends?- You use a word whose meaning has been, until today, unknown to me.

Your country?- I don't know under which latitude she is located

Beauty?- I would love her gladly, goddess and immortal.

Gold?- I hate it as you hate God.

Eh! So, what do you love, extraordinary stranger?- I love the clouds ... the clouds passing ... over there ... over there... the marvelous clouds.August 1862

Lesson Plan I

Préciosité and Précieuses

Historical background:

1610 - Death of Henry IV and Regency of Marie de' Medici, mother of Louis XIII.

1618 - Beginning of the thirty years war.

1623 - Richelieu becomes Prime Minister.

1637 - Marriage of Louis XIII to Anna of Austria.

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1638 - Birth of Louis XIV (Roi Soleil - Sun King).

1643 - Louis XIII dies and Mazarin becomes Prime Minister.

1650 - Rebellion of la Fronde.

1661 - 1715 Louis XIV begins his reign as absolute monarch.

Literary movements:

A - Baroque

B - Preciosite

C - Classicism

Literary genres:

A Theatre:

1 - Moliere

2 - Racine

3 - Corneille

B - Romance

1 - Honore d'Urfé: l'Astre

2 - Mlle de Scudery: Le Grand Cyrrus, Clelia, (including the famous Carte du Tendre)

3 - Scarron, Roman comique

C - Poetry
La Fontaine

The following activities have been especially developed for Junior and High School students enrolled in the French program.

Activities:

A - The students will first review the historical and political background of the 17th century.

B - Reading of the *Précieuses Ridicules*.

C - Discussion of the play:

1- What was the author's purpose in writing this play?

2 - Compare some of the customs of the 17th century with today's customs. How different are they?

3 - Would it be possible to transfer the same situation to modern times, and if so, what could be the outcome?

4 - What was the objective of the ladies?

5 - What were the objectives of the gentlemen?

6 - Do you think the gentlemen were right in playing their joke on the ladies?

D - Writing a poem in the style of the Précieuses:

1 - Review first the words taken from the dictionary.

2 - Invite the students to invent some vocabulary of their own, describing in advance the use of "euphemism" and "ellipsis".

3 - Form groups of two or more students to work together to invent words and phrases and assemble the poem. A monitor should keep track of the two different versions: -ordinary language version and the précieuse version.

Lesson Plan 2

Dandyism

A - Historical background:

1760 -1820 - Most troubled period in British history. The American colonies proclaim their independence.

1820 - 30 - George Iv. Period of industrial unrest.

1830 - 1837 William IV, Financial crash, economic depression.

1837 - 1901 Age of Queen Victoria.

1861 - Prince Albert (Queen Victoria's husband)dies Retreat of Queen Victoria from publiclife.

B - Achievements during the 19th century:

1. Balance between agriculture and industry.

2. The 1832 Reform Bill is introduced.

3. 1840-41 - The China ports are open to foreign trade and Hong Kong becomes British.

4. The Great Exhibition in 1851 shows that England has become "the workshop of the world".

5. Employers and Workmen act (1875) allows masters and men to be on the same level. Trade unions are allowed to picket.

6. The Public Health Act (1875) created a public health authority in every region.
7. Purchase of the Suez Canal.

- Literary Movements

1800-1822 Romanticism: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron. 1843-1873 History: Lord Macaulay, Thomas Carlyle. 1850 - Pre-Raphaelite movement: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris.

Classroom activities:

A - Review of the 19th century in England with discussion of the historical events, the most important figures of the time and the social achievements of that century.

B - The students will read about the exponents of Dandysm.

Suggestions:

The students will be divided into groups and will discuss:

- 1 - Importance of fashion, yesterday and today.
- 2 - Can social events influence the costume of a century?
- 3 - Can costume influence the behavior of a person?
- 4 - Can an individual be judged in a different way according to the way he/she dresses. When, and where?
- 5 - What are the direct and indirect elements that constitute fashion?
- 6 - Is, in your opinion, fashion more important today or was more important yesterday?

This set of questions can be followed by a more personal line of questions which could be: a real personal interview on fashion, individual taste, money spent on clothing etc. Lesson Plan 3

French Dandyisme

A - Historical Background

- 1799 - Napoleon rises to power.
- 1812 - Campaign of Russia.
- 1814 - Napoleon is exiled to the island of Elba.
- 1816 - Louis XVIII becomes king.
- 1815 - Hundred days. Waterloo.
- 1821 - Napoleon dies in St . Helena .
- 1825 - Death of Louis XVIII.
- 1830 - Louis Philippe is king.
- 1848 - Fall of the monarchy. II Republic.
- 1851 — Coup. II empire under Louis Napoleon III.
- 1870 - Louis Napoleon abdicates.
- 1875 - Establishment of III Republic.

B - Achievement during the 19th century:

- 1 - Triumph of the Bourgeoisie.
- 2 - Public education becomes a reality under Napoleon I and Napoleon III.
- 3 - Development of the Press.
- 4 - Construction of the Eiffel Tower.
- 5 - Workday is set at 12 hours for men and 11 hours for women.

C - Literary movements:

- 1800-1850 - Romanticism: Chateaubriand, Stendhal, George Sand, etc.
- 1850-1880 - Realism: Flaubert, Baudelaire, Balzac.
- 1880-1890 - Symbolism: Mallharme, Verlaine.

Suggestions

The students will be divided in groups to discuss:

- 1 - Who could be the interviewer?
- 2 - What gender is the interviewer, is he/she young or old?
- 3 - Why the stranger states that he does not have a family, a country?
- 4 - Why is this person called “a stranger”?
- 5 - What could be the attire of these two persons? After a given time the general discussion should resume and compare the different views.

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