

Classic Poetry Series

**Jean Cocteau**  
**- poems -**

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# Jean Cocteau(5 July 1889 – 11 October 1963)

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, designer, playwright, artist and filmmaker. Cocteau is best known for his novel *Les Enfants terribles* (1929), and the films *Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Les Parents terribles* (1948), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), and *Orpheus* (1949). His circle of associates, friends and lovers included Kenneth Anger, Pablo Picasso, Jean Hugo, Jean Marais, Henri Bernstein, Marlene Dietrich, Coco Chanel, Erik Satie, María Félix, Édith Piaf and Raymond Radiguet.

## <b>Early Life</b>

Cocteau was born in Maisons-Laffitte, Yvelines, a village near Paris, to Georges Cocteau and his wife, Eugénie Lecomte; a socially prominent Parisian family. His father was a lawyer and amateur painter who committed suicide when Cocteau was nine. He left home at fifteen. He published his first volume of poems, *Aladdin's Lamp*, at nineteen. Cocteau soon became known in Bohemian artistic circles as *The Frivolous Prince*, the title of a volume he published at twenty-two. Edith Wharton described him as a man "to whom every great line of poetry was a sunrise, every sunset the foundation of the Heavenly City..."

In his early twenties, Cocteau became associated with the writers Marcel Proust, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/andre-paul-guillaume-gide/">André Gide</a>, and Maurice Barrès. In 1912, he collaborated with Léon Bakst on *Le Dieu bleu* for the Ballets Russes; the principal dancers being Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky. During World War I Cocteau served in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver. This was the period in which he met the poet <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/guillaume-apollinaire/">Guillaume Apollinaire</a>, artists Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani, and numerous other writers and artists with whom he later collaborated. Russian choreographer Sergei Diaghilev persuaded Cocteau to write a scenario for a ballet, which resulted in *Parade*, in 1917. It was produced by Diaghilev, with sets by Picasso, the libretto by Apollinaire and the music by Erik Satie. The piece was later expanded into a full opera, with music by Satie, Poulenc and Ravel. "If it had not been for Apollinaire in uniform," wrote Cocteau, "with his skull shaved, the scar on his temple and the bandage around his head, women would have gouged our eyes out with hairpins." Cocteau denied being a Surrealist or being in any way attached to the movement. Cocteau wrote the libretto for Igor Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, which had its original performance in the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris on May 30, 1927.

An important exponent of avant-garde art, Cocteau had great influence on the work of others, including the group of composers known as Les six. In the early twenties, he and other members of Les six frequented a wildly popular bar named Le Boeuf sur le Toit, a name that Cocteau himself had a hand in picking. The popularity was due in no small measure to the presence of Cocteau and his friends.

### <b>Friendship with Raymond Radiguet</b>

In 1918 he met the French poet <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/raymond-radiguet/">Raymond Radiguet</a>. They collaborated extensively, socialized, and undertook many journeys and vacations together. Cocteau also got Radiguet exempted from military service. In admiration of Radiguet's great literary talent, Cocteau promoted his friend's works in his artistic circle and also arranged for the publication by Grasset of *Le Diable au corps* (a largely autobiographical story of an adulterous relationship between a married woman and a younger man), exerting his influence to have the novel awarded the "Nouveau Monde" literary prize. Some contemporaries and later commentators thought there might have been a romantic component to their friendship. Cocteau himself was aware of this perception, and worked earnestly to dispel the notion that their relationship was sexual in nature.

There is disagreement over Cocteau's reaction to Radiguet's sudden death in 1923, with some claiming that it left him stunned, despondent and prey to opium addiction. Opponents of that interpretation point out that he did not attend the funeral (he generally did not attend funerals) and immediately left Paris with Diaghilev for a performance of *Les noces* (The Wedding) by the Ballets Russes at Monte Carlo. Cocteau himself much later characterised his reaction as one of "stupor and disgust." His opium addiction at the time, Cocteau said, was only coincidental, due to a chance meeting with Louis Laloy, the administrator of the Monte Carlo Opera. Cocteau's opium use and his efforts to stop profoundly changed his literary style. His most notable book, *Les Enfants terribles*, was written in a week during a strenuous opium weaning. In *Opium: Journal of drug rehabilitation* (*Opium : Journal d'une désintoxication*), he recounts the experience of his recovery from opium addiction in 1929. His account, which includes vivid pen-and-ink illustrations, alternates between his moment-to-moment experiences of drug withdrawal and his current thoughts about people and events in his world. Cocteau was supported throughout his recovery by his friend and correspondent philosopher Jacques Maritain. Under Maritain's influence Cocteau made a temporary return to the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

## <b>The Human Voice</b>

Cocteau's experiments with the human voice peaked with his play *La Voix humaine*. The story involves one woman on stage speaking on the telephone with her (invisible and inaudible) departing lover, who is leaving her to marry another woman. The telephone proved to be the perfect prop for Cocteau to explore his ideas, feelings, and "algebra" concerning human needs and realities in communication.

Cocteau acknowledged in the introduction to the script that the play was motivated, in part, by complaints from his actresses that his works were too writer/director-dominated and gave the players little opportunity to show off their full range of talents. *La Voix humaine* was written, in effect, as an extravagant aria for Madame Berthe Bovy. Before came *Orphée*, later turned into one of his more successful films; after came *La Machine infernale*, arguably his most fully realized work of art. *La Voix humaine* is deceptively simple—a woman alone on stage for almost one hour of non-stop theatre speaking on the telephone with her departing lover. It is, in fact, full of theatrical codes harking back to the Dadaists' *Vox Humana* experiments after World War One, Alphonse de Lamartine's "*La Voix humaine*", part of his larger work *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* and the effect of the creation of the *Vox Humana* ("voix humaine"), an organ stop of the Regal Class by Church organ masters (late 16th century) that attempted to imitate the human voice but never succeeded in doing better than the sound of a male chorus at a distance.

Reviews varied at the time and since but whatever the critique, the play represents Cocteau's state of mind and feelings towards his actors at the time: on the one hand, he wanted to spoil and please them; on the other, he was fed up by their diva antics and was ready for revenge. It is also true that none of Cocteau's works has inspired as much imitation: Francis Poulenc's opera *La Voix humaine*, Gian Carlo Menotti's "opera bouffa" *The Telephone* and Roberto Rossellini's film version in Italian with Anna Magnani *L'Amore* (1948). There has also been a long line of interpreters including Simone Signoret, Ingrid Bergman and Liv Ullmann (in the play) and Julia Migenes (in the opera).

According to one theory about how Cocteau was inspired to write *La Voix humaine*, he was experimenting with an idea by fellow French playwright Henri Bernstein.

## <b>Maturity</b>

In the 1930s, Cocteau had an affair with Princess Natalie Paley, the beautiful daughter of a Romanov grand duke and herself a sometimes actress, model, and former wife of couturier Lucien Lelong. She became pregnant. To Cocteau's distress and Paley's life-long regret, the baby was aborted[citation needed]. Cocteau's longest-lasting relationships were with the French actors Jean Marais and Édouard Dermit, whom Cocteau formally adopted. Cocteau cast Marais in *The Eternal Return* (1943), *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), *Ruy Blas* (1947), and *Orpheus* (1949).

Biographer James S. Williams describes Cocteau's politics as "naturally Right-leaning." During the Nazi occupation of France, Cocteau's friend Arno Breker convinced him that Adolf Hitler was a pacifist and patron of the arts with France's best interests in mind. In his diary, Cocteau accused France of disrespect towards Hitler and speculated on the Führer's sexuality. Cocteau effusively praised Breker's sculptures in an article entitled 'Salut à Breker' published in 1942. This piece caused him to be arraigned on charges of collaboration after the war, though he was cleared of any wrongdoing and had in fact used his contacts to attempt to save friends such as Max Jacob.

In 1940, *Le Bel Indifférent*, Cocteau's play written for and starring Édith Piaf, was enormously successful. He also worked with Pablo Picasso on several projects and was friends with most of the European art community. Cocteau's films, most of which he both wrote and directed, were particularly important in introducing the avant-garde into French cinema and influenced to a certain degree the upcoming French New Wave genre.

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In 1945, Cocteau was one of several designers who created sets for the Théâtre de la Mode. He drew inspiration from filmmaker René Clair while making *Tribute to René Clair: I Married a Witch*. The maquette is described in his "Journal 1942-1945," in his entry for February 12, 1945:

I saw the model of my set. Fashion bores me, but I am amused by the set and fashion placed together. It is a smoldering maid's room. One discovers an aerial view of Paris through the wall and ceiling holes. It creates vertigo. On the iron bed lies a fainted bride. Behind her stand several dismayed ladies. On the right, a very elegant lady washes her hands in a flophouse basin. Through the unhinged door on the left, a lady enters with raised arms. Others are pushed against the walls. The vision provoking this catastrophe is a bride-witch astride a

broom, flying through the ceiling, her hair and train streaming.

Cocteau was openly gay. His muse and lover for over 25 years was actor Jean Marais.

Cocteau died of a heart attack at his chateau in Milly-la-Forêt, Essonne, France, on 11 October 1963 at the age of 74. It is said that upon hearing of the death of his friend, the French singer Édith Piaf the same day, he choked so badly that his heart failed. He is buried beneath the floor of the Chapelle Saint Blaise Des Simples in Milly-la-Forêt. The epitaph on his gravestone set in the floor of the chapel reads: "I stay with you" ("Je reste avec vous").

**Honours and awards**

In 1955 Cocteau was made a member of the Académie française and The Royal Academy of Belgium.

During his life Cocteau was commander of the Legion of Honor, Member of the Mallarmé Academy, German Academy (Berlin), American Academy, Mark Twain (U.S.A) Academy, Honorary President of the Cannes film festival, Honorary President of the France-Hungary Association and President of the Jazz Academy and of the Academy of the Disc.

# Awakening

Grave mouths of lions  
Sinuous smiling of young crocodiles  
Along the river's water conveying millions  
Isles of spice  
How lovely he is, the son  
Of the widowed queen  
And the sailor  
The handsome sailor abandons a siren,  
Her widow's lament at the south of the islet  
It's Diana of the barracks yard  
Too short a dream  
Dawn and lanterns barely extinguished  
We are awakening  
A tattered fanfare

Jean Cocteau

# Jean Cocteau's Poem For Welles

Orson Welles is a poet  
through his violence  
and through his grace.  
Never does he tumble  
from the tightrope  
on which he crosses cities  
and their dramas.

He is a poet too in the  
Loyal friendship he bears  
our dreams and our struggles.

Others will know better than I  
how to praise his work.  
I content myself with sending him  
my fraternal greeting.

His handshake is as firm as he is  
and I think of it each time my work  
obliges me to leap over an obstacle.

Jean Cocteau

# L'Ange Heurtebise (Translated In English)

I

Angel Heurtebise on the steps  
Beats me with his wings  
Of watered silk, refreshes my memory,  
The rascal, motionless  
And alone with me on the agate  
Which breaks, ass, your supernatural  
Pack-saddle.

II

Angel Heurtebise with incredible  
Brutality jumps on me. Please  
Don't jump so hard,  
Beastly fellow, flower of tall  
Stature.  
You've laid me up. That's  
Bad manners. I hold the ace, see?  
What do you have?

III

Angel Heurtebise pushes me;  
And you, Lord Jesus, mercy,  
Lift me, raise me to the corner  
Of your pointed knees;  
Undiluted pleasure. Thumb, untie  
The rope! I die.

IV

Angel Heurtebise and angel  
Cegeste killed in the war-what a wondrous  
Name-play  
The role of scarecrows  
Whose gesture no frightens  
The cherries on the heavenly cherry trees  
Under the church's folding door

Accustomed to the gesture yes.

V

My guardian angel, Heurtebise,  
I guard you, I hit you,  
I break you, I change  
Your guard every hour.  
On guard, summer! I challenge  
You, if you're a man. Admit  
Your beauty, angel of white lead,  
Caught in a photograph by an  
Explosion of magnesium.

Jean Cocteau

# Preamble (A Rough Draft For An Ars Poetica)

...Preamble

A rough draft  
for an ars poetica

. . . . .

Let's get our dreams unstuck

The grain of rye  
free from the prattle of grass  
et loin de arbres orateurs

I

plant

it

It will sprout

But forget about  
the rustic festivities

For the explosive word  
falls harmlessly  
eternal through  
the compact generations

and except for you

nothing  
denotates

its sweet-scented dynamite

Greetings  
I discard eloquence

the empty sail  
and the swollen sail  
which cause the ship  
to lose her course

My ink nicks  
and there

and there

and there

and  
there

sleeps  
deep poetry

The mirror-paneled wardrobe  
washing down ice-floes  
the little eskimo girl

dreaming  
in a heap  
of moist negroes  
her nose was  
    flattened  
against the window-pane  
of dreary Christmases

A white bear  
adorned with chromatic moire

dries himself in the midnight sun

Liners

The huge luxury item

Slowly founders  
all its lights aglow

and so  
sinks the evening-dress ball  
into the thousand mirrors  
of the palace hotel

And now  
it is I

the thin Columbus of phenomena  
alone  
in the front  
of a mirror-paneled wardrobe  
full of linen  
and locking with a key

The obstinate miner  
of the void  
exploits  
his fertile mine

the potential in the rough  
glitters there  
mingling with its white rock

Oh  
princess of the mad sleep  
listen to my horn  
and my pack of hounds

I deliver you  
from the forest  
where we came upon the spell

Here we are  
by the pen  
one with the other  
wedded  
on the page

Isles sobs of Ariadne

Ariadnes

dragging along  
Aridnes seals

for I betray you my fair stanzas  
to  
run and awaken  
elsewhere

I plan no architecture

Simply  
deaf  
like you Beethoven

blind  
like you  
Homer  
numberless old man

born everywhere

I elaborate  
in the prairies of inner  
silence

and the work of the mission  
and the poem of the work  
and the stanza of the poem  
and the group of the stanza  
and the words of the group  
and the letters of the word  
and the least  
loop of the letters

it's your foot  
of attentive satin  
that I place in position  
pink  
tightrope walker  
sucked up by the void

to the left to the right

the god gives a shake  
and I walk  
towards the other side  
with infinite precaution

Submitted by Linda M. Gibbs

Jean Cocteau

## Sobre Las Olas (On The Waves)

The boys in striped knitware  
make the waves sprout--is it a storm?  
Everything coos and the bathing girl  
consults the mirror of the skies  
Waltz, emerald carriages  
As a rosebush swells its sides  
Once more on the merry-go-round  
Spring at the bottom of the sea.

Jean Cocteau

## Soft Caramel

Take a young girl.  
Fill her with ice and gin  
shake it all up to make it androgynous  
And return her to her family  
Hello, hello, operator don't cut me off  
Ah! how sad it is to be the king of animals,  
Nobody says a word  
Oh! Love is the worst of evils  
Take a young girl,  
Fill her with ice and gin  
Put a slight drop of angostura on her mouth  
I knew a man very unhappy in love  
Who played Chopin's nocturnes on the drum  
Hello, hello, operator don't cut me off  
I was talking to....I was talking to the....hello, hello?  
Nobody says a word.  
—don't you find that art is a bit.....  
We tell children wash your hands  
We don't tell 'em wash your teeth.....  
Soft caramel--

Jean Cocteau

# Toreador

Pepita queen of Venice  
When you go beneath your shutter  
All gondoliers call out:  
Watch out--Toreador!  
No one rules your heart  
In the grand palace where you sleep  
And near you the old duenna lies in waiting  
for the Toreador.  
Toreador, bravest of the brave  
When in Piazza San Marco  
The wild, slobbering bull  
Falls slain by your blade  
It is not pride that caresses  
Your heart beneath your golden cape  
It is for a young goddess  
That your passion burns, toreador.

(refrain)

Lovely Spanish girl  
In your gondola  
Dancing and prancing  
Carmencita  
Under your mantilla  
Sparkling eyes  
Shining mouth  
That's Pepita

Tomorrow is St. Escurio's Day,  
With its combat to the death  
The canal is full of sails  
Celebrating the Toreador  
More than one Venetian beauty  
Trembles to know your fate  
But you despise all their laces—you suffer—  
Toreador.  
Since not seeing her appear  
Hidden behind an orange tree,  
Pepita alone at her window

You think about vengeance.  
Under your caftan slips your dagger  
Jealousy gnaws at your heart  
And alone with the noise of the waves  
You weep toreador.

So many horsemen! so great a crowd!  
Filling the arena to its limits  
From a hundred leagues people keep coming  
To cheer you—Toreador!  
And so he enters the arena  
With more composure than a lord  
But he can scarcely walk, the poor  
Toreador.

His gloomy dream contains no more  
Than to die before the eyes of all  
As he feels the piercing of those horns  
Within his sad, troubled brow  
He sees Pepita sitting there,  
Offering her gaze and her body  
To the oldest doge of Venice  
Laughing at the toreador.

Jean Cocteau