

10-1-2012

# La poétique romanesque de Joris-Karl Huysmans (book review)

Juliana Starr

*University of New Orleans, jstarr1@uno.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl\\_facpubs](http://scholarworks.uno.edu/fl_facpubs)



Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Starr, Juliana. "La Poétique Romanesque de Joris-Karl Huysmans by Stéphanie Guérin-Marmigère." (book review) *French Review* 86.1 (Oct 2012): 182-83.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Foreign Languages at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Foreign Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uno.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uno.edu).

Although the centennial of the death of Huysmans (1848–1907) sparked renewed interest in his works—which had in fact been growing since their republication in the 1970s—he is still widely seen as a secondary writer. Traditionally, critics have offered biographical readings, describing his books as a series of radical aesthetic and spiritual conversions (naturalist, decadent, mystical, Catholic) corresponding more or less to his departure from the naturalist school and eventual religious awakening. For Guérin-Marmigère, however, this “périodisation systématique” (10) of Huysmans’s life and career has caused us to overlook the coherence of his work, to ignore him as a daring innovator, and to cast him mistakenly as writer of eccentric, isolated novels. She thus attempts to place him where he rightfully belongs—at the forefront of the major crisis in the French novel at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Huysmans’s novelistic poetics provide a snapshot of this vital period of transition, while at the same time testifying to the literary specificity of his works.

This exhaustive yet highly readable study proposes to liberate Huysmansian criticism from biographical interpretations, thereby leading us to the discovery of an important novelist who was careful to preserve his originality, hostile to formulas, and open to experimentation. By examining the techniques used in nine novels and other texts, Guérin-Marmigère analyzes the inner workings of Huysmansian narrative in light of major categories such as architecture, plot, character, chronology, and discourse, revealing a textual universe in which the very notion of literary genre is constantly challenged. Dividing her book into five parts comprised of three or four chapters each, she begins with a study of Huysmans as a theoretician of the novel, positing that, although he always worked under the aesthetic banners of stylistic singularity and novelty, he never really abandoned naturalism—if only in his life-long commitment to research and documentation. Part two examines how Huysmans subverted novelistic conventions of the adventure, quest, romantic, and naturalist genres in order to broaden the possibilities of plot. Her pages on parody as a means of dismantling the romantic idyll, her insights on the preference of repetition and circularity over linearity, and her assertions about micro-narratives and fragmentation all provide fascinating reading. Part three sees complexity, indecision, artistic insurgence, and “héroïsme cognitif” (269) as leitmotifs of Huysmans’s characters. In this sense, they are symbols for the crisis in the novel itself. Part four studies notions of space and time, revealing how Huysmans created new narrative structures imitating the movements of human conscience, thereby allowing him to go beyond the surface of the real and introduce into the novelistic genre an invisible reality close to what André Breton called “surréalité” (375). Finally, part five asserts

that, paradoxically, it is in its polyphonic nature, multiple fluctuations, and conspicuous heterogeneity that the Huysmansian narrative finds its unity.

This book argues convincingly that Huysmans's poetics cannot be reduced to a succession of isolated tendencies, but rather must be understood as a complex process of evolution. Perhaps most importantly, it shows that by turning the novelistic adventure inward to the exploration of the mind, memory, dreams, psychic pathologies, mysticism, Satanism, conversion, and faith, Huysmans was ahead of his time in opening the universe of the novel to the unconscious and to spirituality. Hence, though he was keenly interested in reevaluating the past, he was above all strikingly modern. This well-organized, meticulously researched volume is of great worth to all students of the French novel and is a landmark for Huysmans scholars.