

Genet, Jean

(December 19, 1910 – April 15, 1986)
 Novelist, Playwright, Poet

Jean Genet stands apart from most authors in that he completed much of his work as a prisoner. His shocking, anarchistic, and often obscene subject matter depicts the life he lived as a tramp, thief, and homosexual prostitute in the streets and prisons of Europe, and the criminal acts his characters commit are often elevated to religious acts. Genet was born in Paris to a prostitute, Gabrielle Genet, who abandoned him in his infancy. He did not discover his identity until he was 21. His supervision fell to the National Foundling Society, and he was raised by a peasant family in the Morvan region of France. Genet's long career as a criminal began at the age of 10, when he was caught stealing. When his behavior grew too unbearable for his adoptive family, they sent him to the strict Mettray Reform School. Having escaped from the school in 1929, he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion in order to get the enlistment bonus, but quickly deserted to return to the streets of Europe.

During the 1930s, Genet traveled in Europe and engaged himself in criminal activity. Until 1948, Genet spent much of his time in and out of prison for theft and prostitution. For Genet crime evolved into much more than a means of survival. Thefts and forbidden sexual experiences became religious acts of self-assertion against society, as they so often are for the characters in his works. While serving time in Fresnes prison, he wrote his first poem "*Le Condamné à Mort*" (The Man Condemned to Death). There he also wrote his first novel, *Notre Dame des Fleurs* (1943; Our Lady of the Flowers), on the paper used to make brown bags. The narrator of the story admires the toughest, most fearless criminals such as Our Lady of the Flowers. Our Lady of the Flowers is a young murderer who boldly faces his fate, execution.

Genet's next novel, *Miracle de la rose* (1945-1946; Miracle of the Rose) describes his experience at the reform school in Mettray and was written in a Paris penitentiary. *Pompes funebres* (1947; Funeral Rites) is set during the Paris Liberation and unfolds over two days after the death of the narrator's lover. His main character in *Querelle de Brest* (1947; Quarrel of Brest) is George Quarrel (a character based on Genet's lover Jean Descamin), a heroic murderer and drug smuggler, and the story examines the dynamics of homosexual relations. *The Thief's Journal* (1949), Genet's last novel, recounts his own sordid existence as a prostitute and thief. In these novels, Genet's narrative is fragmented, utilizing flashbacks, stream of consciousness, confusing time elements, and street jargon.

In 1948, Genet was convicted a tenth time for theft, which in France carried a sentence of life in prison. However, his novels had by then impressed a number of leading French artists and writers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Gide, and Jean Cocteau. Sartre, Cocteau and others successfully petitioned France's president for Genet's pardon.

After his release, Genet turned to writing absurdist plays. The characters in his early dramas resemble those of his novels. *Les Bonnes* (1947; The Maids) was inspired by two servant girls who murdered their master and mistress. Genet transformed the real-life story into a psychological and spiritual treatment of two sisters, Claire and Solange, who enjoy acting the part of their mistress and her maid and plan to murder the mistress. When she refuses to drink the poisoned tea they have prepared for her, they ritually and religiously prepare for Solange to murder Claire with the tea while the latter plays the mistress. In Haute