FRENCH TEACHERS’ RESOURCES
TEACHING FILM AND LITERATURE FOR AS AND A2

STUDYING:

BONJOUR TRISTESSE
FRANÇOISE SAGAN
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TEXT ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION AND RESOURCE RATIONALE

These resources have been developed in response to changes in the content of the AS/A2 curricula for modern foreign languages (French, Spanish and German), which are effective from September 2016. They have been designed to give support and guidance to MFL teachers in selecting and teaching the film and literature content of the curricula.

There are five sections to this resource:

1. Why teach this text?
   This section explains the relevance and benefits of teaching this text/film for teachers and their students. It also describes how the text/film fits in to the A-level as a whole, as well as its links with other A-level subjects.

2. Ways to read this text
   This section briefly describes the different critical lenses for reading a text/film, as well as outlining different themes. This section will be particularly useful for the A2 exam questions, which are theme-based. Topics from previous exam questions have been integrated into this section.

3. Students
   This section suggests how this text/film can appeal to certain students, according to interests, studies and background. For example this film will appeal to students who may be interested in studying social policy.

4. Useful passages/sequences
   This section highlights specific sequences/passages from the film/text that are especially rich and point towards the ways in which these can be used for teaching.
   a. Characters
      This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of characterisation and character relationships in the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the AS exam questions, which focus on character analysis.
   b. Themes
      This sub-section highlights a passage which would be useful in the teaching of a major theme in the context of the whole text/film. This selected sequence/passage is normally an effective inroad for the discussion of the wider concerns/themes of the text/film. This sub-section is particularly useful for the A2 exam question, which is based on wider analysis of themes/contexts.
   c. Language and form
      This sub-section highlights a linguistically rich and/or interesting passage/sequence in terms of grammar, style, tone, genre, register, dialect, pronunciation etc. This sub-section is not exam-focused but teachers may find it useful for other focuses i.e. themes, characterisation, genre.

5. Further reading
   This section provides links to websites, useful sources, articles and online books in English and each target language that can be used as pedagogic resources and/or preparatory material.

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BONJOUR TRISTESSE
FRANÇOISE SAGAN, 1954
**Why teach this text?**

Bonjour tristesse is a short, beautifully written novel with a vibrant sense of place and a taut, compelling plot. The novel's reception when it was first published some 60 years ago gives some indication of why it can be a good text to study at A-level.

- the author was an 18-year-old girl, the first-person narrator even younger. The scandalised reaction that greeted it points up the contrast in social values between then and now.
- the novel's themes are likely to resonate with a mid to late teenage readership: ambivalent relations with parents (and step-parents), love and sex, the thrill and anxiety of adult life beginning.
- though very much a modern girl of her day, Sagan was steeped in French literary culture and wrote with elegant concision - she provides a good example of nuanced, evocative French style.

**Ways to read this text**

The **social context** of post-war France provides a first interesting angle on the novel. After the Occupation, under the new Fourth Republic, France saw a period of economic expansion and rapid modernisation: the influence of American consumer culture introduced the concept of the teenager as a marketing category (new fashions, nascent rock'n'roll, cinema, magazines) and as a new social phenomenon that horrified the more conservative. The publisher of Bonjour Tristesse, René Julliard, was entrepreneurial and alive to the mood of the day - he published several novels by young women writers that became 'succès de scandale', of which this was the most successful. What was it about Cécile's behaviour and attitudes that was considered shocking?

The novel certainly merits **thematic** analysis particularly in terms of gender (in what ways is Cécile's situation specifically female? what kind of masculinity does the father represent? is Anne a good model of how to be a woman?), and morality (what is the tristesse that Cécile meets in the course of the story? what values does the novel imply?).

**Structure and style** are worth a close look too (see below). The time of the novel is circular, it is divided fairly evenly into two parts with many echoes between the two. And Sagan manages to evoke, vividly, the sensory experience of a summer on the Côte d'Azur, as well as the intensity of emotions and the narrator's conflicting desires to preserve the carefree, hedonistic life she shares with her father, or to develop the more substantial qualities of ‘fidélité, gravité, engagement’ (15) that she recognises in Anne.

**Students**

The novel should appeal to students with interests in history, particularly social history, in literature, and language. It also provides an interesting lens on changing constructions of gender and family relationships.

**Useful passages**

1. **Characters**
   **Part 1 chapter 3 (pages 25–30)**

   The chapter narrates the first morning after Anne’s arrival at the villa. It opposes Cécile’s pleasure in a carefree, hedonistic life to the more future-oriented, considered philosophy that Anne represents and that will change the whole direction of Cécile’s summer. Anne is deftly portrayed through physical description, dialogue, and Cécile’s reflexions, and is situated in relation to the novel’s other main protagonists.

   Cécile, who has spent some years in an austere ‘pension’ or boarding school, savours intensely the simple sensory delights of summer on the Mediterranean, and Sagan conveys these through vivid sense impressions. Waking to the warmth of the sun on her skin, Cécile goes down to an outdoor breakfast: sips of hot coffee alternating with the sweet, sharp coldness of an orange. The sea is waiting for her, as is Cyril with his ‘épaules larges, corps dur’ and sun-browned skin. But Anne is there too, elegant, composed, carefully made-up ('Elle ne devait jamais s’accorder de vraies vacances' thinks Cécile), and her voice first interrupts Cécile’s pleasure in the morning, as she advises her to eat more sensibly. Anne’s calm air of control will re-appear a little later on the beach, when her perfect, well-maintained body is revealed in a bathing suit, and she takes a clearer stand against the carefree, live-for-the-moment attitude of her hosts by decreeing that Cécile must work during her vacation and re-sit the important examination she has failed.

   The depiction of Anne is strengthened too by contrast with Elsa, whom Sagan also makes a vivid physical presence, with her red hair, fair skin and youthful prettiness flawed by her ill-judged attempts to gain a suntan. It is Elsa’s unreflective desire for immediate pleasure that has led to her present ‘état lamentable’ (28): sunburnt, puffy-eyed, and given to chattering ('Elsa pérorait sur les festivités...', 29) she contrasts negatively with Anne’s discreet beauty and measured conversation. Cécile notes her father’s growing admiration for Anne.
What complicates the scene, and will be central to the novel's central drama, is the ambivalence of Cécile's feelings for Anne. On the one hand the force of her pleasure in sensation, including sexual pleasure ('je me suis à trembler de plaisir comme lui', 28), makes Anne her enemy, for Anne represents the voice of reason, prudence and the work ethic (Anne herself is a successful, hard-working designer), opposed to the immediate, uncensored self-gratification that characterises the life of Cécile and her father. It is significant that Anne's voice interrupts Cécile's total pleasure in the sensations of the morning (‘la voix d'Anne me fit sursauter’, 25), and that her question about the exam breaks into Cécile's drowsy reflexions on the beach. Cécile's first swim in the sea led to a sensation of ‘bonheur, insouciance parfaite’ (28), but when she runs back into the sea after recognising her father's growing desire for Anne, this is in a very different spirit of anxiety and regret for a summer that now feels spoilt.

On the other hand, she cannot keep herself from admiring this self-assured, composed woman whose way of life suggests a shape and purpose lacking in Cécile's own, and whose carefully controlled emotions she also recognises beneath the smooth surface (in response to the tenderness in Raymond's voice, Cécile sees 'les paupières d'Anne battre comme sous une caresse imprévue', 26). Anne is not simply a conventional killjoy, but a strong, self-willed woman ('elle ne souriait que quand elle en avait envie, jamais par décence, comme tout le monde', 28) who is also sensitive to emotion and capable of intense feeling. She is a possible model for Cécile herself, if the cost (self-denial, a structured life) were not so high. Though she resents Anne's quasi-maternal injunctions, Cécile responds to them by becoming more childlike: 'je la suppliai de ne pas m'imposer des tartines' (28); 'je me traînai jusqu'à Anne, l'appelai à voix basse' (29). Much as she fears a sudden imposition of maternal authority, Cécile is drawn to the possibility of a warm, strong mother figure – doing one thing, whilst knowing at some repressed level that it is not what we really want to do. Elsa, Cécile sees, is 'indigne et médiocre' (114); she suddenly feels 'traquée' and fearful (116) and would almost like to wash her hands of the whole affair. When Anne emerges from the woods – an interesting space in the novel, where most illicit or fateful encounters occur - distraught and wounded, the full implications of Cécile's manipulations suddenly become real. Cécile undergoes an epiphany – a full, painful recognition that to play with people's lives has real, lived consequences. Anne, instead of simply a threat to Cécile and her father's sybaritic lifestyle, becomes a three-dimensional human being with a past, a heart, and a capacity for suffering (118). Cécile is 'pétrifiée', and Anne's final words of pity 'Ma pauvre petite fille!' (119) confirm that she has wounded not only Anne but also herself.

2. Themes
Part 2 chapter 10 (pages 114–119)
This is the chapter in which Cécile's plotting reaches its successful conclusion. It begins mainly in the imperfect tense as the narrator describes life at the villa just before the dramatic dénouement: Anne's happiness which touches Cécile even as she continues to pursue her 'basses petites manoeuvres' (115) by playing on her father's 'désirs violents' (115), the pleasure of playing the puppeteer and controlling events mixed with the disagreeable stab of jealousy when she sees Cyril kissing Elsa, and the more profound sense of discomfort that makes her want to shrug off responsibility for the developing drama. The action speeds up and the past historic tense takes over when Elsa announces her rendezvous with Raymond ('Un beau matin..., 115). Events then move quickly to Anne's discovery of her lover's infidelity, her last dialogue with Cécile and her sudden, dramatic departure.

The central theme here as in the novel as a whole is morality, or the conflict between a philosophy of hedonism (life is best lived in the pursuit of as much pleasure as possible) and one of responsibility (a good life demands effort, order, and some contribution to the collective good, and in the end this will also make our own lives more fulfilling). Cécile is an intelligent and lucid narrator, even if at times she signals to us that self-deception would be more comfortable ('On ne saurait me le reprocher’, 115). Even as she enjoys the power of manipulating others ('Ce rôle de metteur-en-scène ne laissait pas de me passionner', 114), and moreover others considerably older than herself (Cyril and Elsa – and less directly her father and Anne), she is aware of deep misgivings about the rightness of what she is doing, and its possible results. Sagan is skilful in her representation of that split consciousness that many of us can probably recognise – doing one thing, whilst knowing at some repressed level that it is not what we really want to do. Elsa, Cécile sees, is 'indigne et médiocre' (114); she suddenly feels ‘traquée’ and fearful and would almost like to wash her hands of the whole affair. When Anne emerges from the woods – an interesting space in the novel, where most illicit or fateful encounters occur - distraught and wounded, the full implications of Cécile's manipulations suddenly become real. Cécile undergoes an epiphany – a full, painful recognition that to play with people's lives has real, lived consequences. Anne, instead of simply a threat to Cécile and her father's sybaritic lifestyle, becomes a three-dimensional human being with a past, a heart, and a capacity for suffering (118). Cécile is 'pétrifiée', and Anne's final words of pity 'Ma pauvre petite fille!' (119) confirm that she has wounded not only Anne but also herself.
The final two chapters will show that she recovers, and integrates this experience into the way of life and the underlying philosophy that she knows best. But she has encountered sadness (bonjour, tristesse) and there will always be a darker undertone and a certain brittleness to her life of frivolity. Though she prefers to think of the lifestyle she shares with her father as that of ‘la belle race pure des nomades’, she has an unwelcome feeling that they belong rather to the ‘race pauvre et déssechée des jouisseurs’ (111).

There are other themes too in this chapter. Cécile is at a transitional point in life where she must decide what sort of woman she is going to be. Elsa and Anne can be seen as stark representations of her alternatives. Elsa lives off men, rather vaguely ‘fais(ant) de la figuration dans les studios et les bars des Champs-Élysées’ (10), and accepting holidays, gifts, possibly more than that in exchange for her beauty, her company and sex. Though Cécile will benefit from having a rich father, it is a more camouflaged version of this that Raymond foresees for her: ‘Ma fille trouvera toujours des hommes pour la faire vivre’ (29). Elsa has an agreeable, even glamorous life and has to do little work to earn it – but it all depends on her youth and beauty, and her future (never explicitly evoked in the novel but relevant nonetheless) is very uncertain. Cécile is consistently if mildly contemptuous of her father’s mistress, even as she makes choices that condemn her to a similar path in life. Anne is clearly a more admirable model of femininity, independent, strong-minded, and at moments emotionally warm. But the life of a single, divorced, career woman in 1950s France does not seem easy: she is constantly aware of the need to work, and loneliness seems to underlie, in part, her vulnerability to Raymond’s charm. Cécile’s reluctance to take Anne as her model is rendered with some sympathy.

It seems easier to be a man. Raymond is not so dependent on his looks, though he does exercises on the beach to stave off a threatening paunch, and is clearly afraid of losing his powers of seduction. But he has family money behind him and a successful, glamorous career that seems to cost him little work. Cyril too has a future as a lawyer mapped out, and is happily conventional in his views of sex and romance: since he has made love to Cécile, he must surely ‘love’ her, and even offer to marry her (75). Cécile is not attracted to this future, either: the classic role of wife and mother seems no more appealing than the roles represented by Elsa and Anne. Part of the novel’s appeal lay perhaps in its capturing of doubts and anxieties about women’s role and identity in post war France.

A final theme touched on in this chapter, and central to the novel’s power to shock at the time of publication (François Mauriac, eminent novelist and critic, found the novel guilty of ‘dévergondage de l’adolescence féminine’), is sex. Cécile refers quite casually to her relations with Cyril, into which she flees in an effort to blank out moral anxiety ‘Près de lui tout devenait facile, chargé de violence, de plaisir’ (117). The pleasure of his body is described in sensory terms similar to those used to evoke the sunshine and the sea, that is, without any sense of shame or doubt. Sagan affirms in a ‘taken for granted way’ the sexuality of her teenage heroine, and her actively desiring role in the relationship. In those pre-pill days, sexually active young heroines might appear in novels or films but they tended to suffer the consequences, often in the form of an unwanted pregnancy. As Sagan herself was to comment later, the problem with Bonjour Tristesse – at least for the more conservative public – was that her heroine went unpunished:


This is certainly not an explicitly feminist novel, but it does quietly assume that young women experience sexual desire as much as young men, and it invites readers’ empathy with a girl who freely expresses such desire. Readers at the time (and we can safely assume that the majority of them were female) sent the book to the top of the bestseller charts.
3. Language and form

Even though critics expressed disapproval of the novel's morals, there was general agreement that Bonjour tristesse was well written: it won the prestigious Prix des critiques in 1954, and even Mauriac acknowledged its ‘merite litteraire’ which, he said, ‘eclate des la premiere page’. What pleased the guardians of France’s much prized literary tradition was in part the classicism of Sagan’s novel. Seventeenth-century French classical theatre (Corneille, Racine) followed the model of antique Greek tragedy in observing what were known as the ‘unities’: unity of time (the action took place within 24 hours); unity of place (no scene changes – everything happened in a single setting); unity of action (the plot moved tightly to its conclusion – no sub-plots). Bonjour tristesse is almost classical in structure: it all takes place within a single summer, almost all of the action takes place in a single setting (villa, woods and beach), and the plot is taut, moving inexorably to a conclusion signalled in advance by the narrator, now looking back over the preceding months. It is tightly and neatly constructed, divided into two more or less equal halves, the second half beginning as Cécile moves from observing (with displeasure) Anne’s effect on her own life and future, to taking action. The narrative also has a neat circularity, as we return in the final chapter to the retrospective narrator who first told us of the ‘tristesse’ that ‘(la) separe des autres’ (9).

The style could also be termed ‘classical’ in that it is simple, pared down, rather than expansive, romantic, or lyrical. Analysis of a single passage will show more clearly the specific qualities of Sagan’s style.

‘Je me rends compte que j’oublie...’ to ‘une vie de bassesses et de turpitudes’, pp. 22-24.

The presence of a retrospective narrator remembering a summer now ended is re-established in the first line, as is the importance to the whole book of the hot sun and the constant rhythm of the waves. Cécile is very alive to the material world and thinks in part through the senses: what one remembers of this novel, long after its first reading, is often that strong atmosphere of sea, heat and Mediterranean light. The description is very simple: just ‘la mer, son rythme incessant (the only adjective), le soleil’ (22), but the rhythm of the words themselves (what Sagan called her ‘petite musique’) makes them a pleasure to read. A little of Cécile’s ‘back story’ (preceding the period of this narrative) is then evoked, again with simplicity and concision: the plaits and the ‘vilaine robe presque noire’ are all we need to evoke the austerity of Cécile’s life in the boarding school, and to understand Raymond’s slightly embarrassed reaction to this plain looking schoolgirl daughter landing in his elegant Parisian life. In the same way, the single detail of never knowing the actors’ names when she was first taken by friends to the cinema (23) is an economical way of showing Cécile’s initial, brief sense of being an ignorant outsider in her new milieu.

Raymond’s character is deftly evoked in a few lines. His first negative reaction (‘sourire gené’, 22) to his daughter’s appearance is swiftly overtaken by exuberant pleasure in her resemblance to him and anticipation of the role she will play in his life. Only the word ‘jouet’ suggests Cécile’s doubts about his qualities as a father – she will become another novel plaything in his pleasure-filled life - which she largely defends ‘je ne veux pas laisser croire ...’ (23), if not without a note of self-doubt (‘son seul defaut.’ [23]). This passage establishes with great economy the sense of complicity that rapidly connects father and daughter. Cécile shares whole heartedly in Raymond’s cheerful materialism (‘Paris, le luxe, la vie facile’, 22), and follows his example too in enjoying casual romantic encounters.

When Cécile describes her first relationships with boys, Sagan uses an interesting technique of depersonalisation. It is not the individual boy that matters, but the generic pleasure of romance and ‘le plaisir des baisers’. The indefinite ‘vous’ is used repeatedly: ‘je savourais le plaisir [...] d’etre avec quelqu’un qui vous regarde dans les yeux, vous prend la main et vous emmène loin de la même foule’ (my italics). The sequence of a romantic encounter is pre-established, conventional: that is what a boy and a girl who are attracted to each other do, in 1950s Paris and in Cécile’s social group. She is learning the rules. But ‘vous’ also involves the reader, who is invited to imagine herself (or himself?) in Cécile’s place. After that, the boyfriend becomes ‘il’: as Cécile explicitly says, his name, and hence his identity as an individual, scarcely mattered. Cécile will appreciate Cyril in a similar way, for his good looks and the fun and pleasure he can provide.

The narrator provides us with a vivid sense of what it was like to be a fifteen-year-old, still naive Cécile, but she herself is now a little older and wiser, not least thanks to the events of the summer and her encounter with ‘tristesse’. The elegance of her syntax and vocabulary – Cécile’s language is rarely colloquial – adds to the sense of a narrator more mature than the self she is describing. The language at times carries a note of irony about her former self: she can see that she amused her father’s friends, intentionally or not: ‘j’amusais aussi par mon âge’ (23); her seizing on the cynical maxim of Oscar Wilde is treated intentionally or not: ‘je me rends compte que j’oublie...’ to ‘une vie de bassesses et de turpitudes’, pp. 22-24.

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So in all, the novel is tightly constructed and woven together; few words are less than essential to the whole. Sagan's style and structure are classical in their simplicity and concision: she prefers a precise, telling detail to a more abstract description of a character or of feelings. Both language and plot could be termed cohesive: everything is connected, and nothing is simply decorative. The dryness of the narrator's tone creates a nice sense of irony and humour, but at the same time this is an intensely sensory and felt world, and the reader is invited to empathise with Cecile's sensations, thoughts, feelings and self-doubt.

Further reading

- Heather Lloyd: Bonjour Tristesse (University of Glasgow Introductory Guides to French Literature, 35, 1995)
- Nathalie Morello: Bonjour Tristesse (Grant & Cutler, 1998. Critical guides to French texts, 122)