



Early Life

Alexandre Dumas was born on July 24, 1802, near Soissons, France. He was the third child of a Creole general of the French Revolutionary armies. His grandfather was from a noble family, and his grandmother had been a Dominican slave. Dumas's father died when he was four years old, leaving the family with very little money. Dumas was not a very good student, but his handwriting was noticeably beautiful, and he studied to work as a notary (a public officer who witnesses the signing of important documents and makes them official). He also began writing musical comedies and then historical plays in collaboration (working together with others) with a poet friend named Adolphe de Leuven. Historical subjects, as well as his ability to collaborate, were to be permanent elements of Dumas's work during his career.

Dumas then found work as a secretary to the Duke of Orléans (later King Louis Philippe, 1773–1850) in Paris, France. He read and attended the theater as much as he could during his time off. He was greatly influenced by the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and wrote his first plays in 1825 and 1826. Others followed, with *Henri III et sa cour* (1829) bringing him great success and popularity. The revolution of 1830 slowed down Dumas's writing, and he became a strong supporter of the Marquis de Lafayette. His political activities were viewed unfavorably by the new king, his former boss, and he was forced to leave France for a time. A series of amusing travel books resulted from this period of exile.

His Fiction

When Dumas returned to Paris, he began writing a new series of historical plays. By 1851 he had written alone, or in collaboration with others, more than twenty plays. He also began writing fiction at this time. As was the case with Dickens in England, his books were published in cheap newspapers in serial form. Dumas proved able to crank out popular stories at an amazing rate, and soon became the most famous writer in France. In collaboration with Auguste Maquet he wrote *The Three Musketeers* (1844; *Les Trois Mousquetaires*) and *Twenty Years After* (1845; *Vingt Ans après*). *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1846; *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*) was also a product of this period. It took Dumas 18 installments and two years to publish the entire book.

Dumas' novels tend to be long and full of flowery description (some cynics suggest that this is because he was paid by the word), and for this reason often appear today in the form of abridged translations. Dumas worked with many collaborators who helped him with the outlines of his romances. At least a thousand works were published under his own name, most were due to his own hard work and amazing imagination. As an author, much like Shakespeare, Dumas tended to draw his plots from history (to which he did not adhere very carefully) and from the writings of others. The basic plot for *The Count of Monte Cristo* was taken from a narrative of famous police cases written by Jacques Peuchet. In Peuchet's book he tells the story of François Picaud, a young man engaged to a wealthy girl. His friends envied him and denounced him as an English spy, and he was imprisoned for seven years. In prison, he met a wealthy Italian clergyman, who left him his fortune when he died. Picaud used his new fortune, along with many disguises, to avenge himself on his enemies. Building on this brief police narrative, Dumas produced one of the greatest adventure stories in all of literature.

Dumas's works were received with enthusiasm by his loyal readers, and he earned a lot of money. He could never earn enough to keep up with his spending habits, however. Among his problems was his estate of Monte-Cristo, which attracted many hangers-on and female admirers whom Dumas ended up supporting.

Later Life

Dumas, who had never changed his political opinions, was pleased by the Revolution of 1848 and even ran as a candidate for the Assembly. In 1850 the Théâtre-Historique, which he had founded to present his plays, failed. After Napoleon III (1808–1873) took power in 1852, Dumas went to Brussels, Belgium, where his secretary managed to straighten out his affairs to a degree. Here he continued to write constantly.

In 1853 Dumas returned to Paris and began the daily paper *Le Mousquetaire*, which was devoted to art and literature. The paper survived until 1857, and Dumas then published the weekly paper *Monte-Cristo*. This in turn folded after three years. In 1860 he was named keeper of museums in Naples, Italy. After remaining there for four years, he returned to Paris, where he found himself deep in debt and regularly chased by debt collectors. He also had many women friends who expected—and received—expensive gifts from him.

Working hard to pay his debts, Dumas produced a number of works of lower quality, among them *Madame de Chamblay* (1863) and *Les Mohicans de Paris* (1864), which were not very successful. His unhappy last years were softened by the presence of his son, Alexandre, and his daughter, Madame Petel. (The elder Alexandre Dumas is generally called Dumas père to distinguish him from his son, known as Dumas fils, who was also a dramatist and novelist.) Dumas père died in poverty on December 5, 1870.

Directions: *Using the article on Dumas, answer the following questions in complete sentences.*

1. How do you think Dumas' heritage, father, and grandfather affected his life and writing?

2. What aspects of Dumas' political life do you believe will be present in *The Count of Monte Cristo*?

3. Dumas' looked to other authors for inspiration. Name a few of these men and describe how their writing affected his.

4. How did poor spending habits affect Dumas' writing career?

5. If you were completing a research project on Alexandre Dumas, what two research questions would you want to investigate further?
