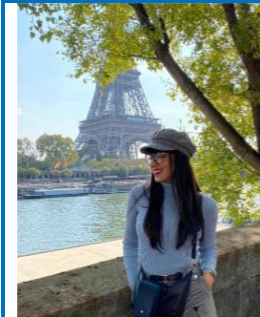


## FRENCH



My name is Lavinia-Miruna Constantinescu and I am an English and French finalist at the University of Warwick. I have always been drawn towards the dynamic interplay between literature, linguistics, philosophy and bilingualism. Being Romanian, I am naturally at ease with Romance languages and strongly attracted to Germanic ones.

I am fluent in English and French, two languages I started learning when I was five years old. I also have working knowledge of Spanish and German. My year abroad in Paris, at the Sorbonne (Faculty of Letters, Paris IV) was a unique and valuable experience, which gave me exposure to a highly competitive and culturally diverse environment. I equally consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to live for one year in one of the most beautiful European cities. Even under the circumstances of the pandemic, the study placement in Paris has contributed to both my professional and personal development, and I do hope this story reflects how a Parisian setting has the unparalleled capacity to brighten any heart, any day, at any time.

### **9. Paris is a party (KS4 & 5)**

*Miruna Constantinescu*

There is nothing more annoying than the silence of a blank page. The emptiness into which the contemplation of this infinite blankness plunged me was so profound that I decided to go out into the city to escape this unhappy state of mind.

Everything was an indecipherable enigma. I was absolutely sure that I had saved the document on my computer that contained my paper due next week for the French literature

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class. Yet when I tried to read my work again, to correct any mistakes that had escaped my critical attention, I was met with the mocking absence of a blank page. Like all writers, I knew that every lost word was by nature irreplaceable.

Wandering the labyrinth of Parisian alleys in the Vth arrondissement seemed the only remedy for my despair. It was not the idea of having to try again that troubled me so much. The reason for my grief was the vanished trace of those words that had fit perfectly on the empty page, words that were now only echoes of silence.

The rainy afternoon was in keeping with my sadness, which stretched across Paris. It is strange how we always see the world around us through our inner joys or torments! My deplorable state of mind was briefly dispelled by the discovery of a small bookshop, located near Notre Dame Cathedral. I heard some cheerful voices speaking English worthy of Trafalgar Square, London. This little bookshop from where the intoxicating scent of leafed-through books emerged had succeeded in taming my sadness, which was suddenly replaced by the curiosity to enter.

"Welcome to the Shakespeare & Company," I heard the man working the counter say.

A book with a gold cover caught my eye. Paris is a party, I read on the front cover with the title written in calligraphy. The book looked more like a manuscript: there were ink stains here and there and question marks accompanied some sentences. Leafing through the book, I felt as if I were entering a deserted house, where the objects still bore the marks of the owner's fingers. Every turn of the page revealed a secret that

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had to remain hidden. There was an elegance that enveloped the book's sentences in a pristine beauty. The words fell perfectly on the page, which followed the heartbeat of its author. The discovery of this perfect manuscript made me think briefly of my lost duty.

"I know that sorry look very well. I have often been the victim of words."

As I looked up from the book, I saw a man dressed modestly, but with a special charm. His velvety voice, his kindly gaze and the mischievous smile on the corner of his mouth made me observe him very carefully. I saw a few ink stains on his fingers that betrayed the writer hidden deep inside him.

"I was only 18 when I was sent to France as a war correspondent. I followed and sometimes even outpaced the Allied troops on their march to Paris. For a child who had recently reached the age of maturity that he had longed for, it was an extraordinary thing: to participate in the writing of history. Being there, even in the midst of the war, seemed infinitely better than still living in America, in a small town where nothing ever happened. As I breathed the breath of death, I saw men with beating hearts being reduced to corpses. The helplessness of warriors in the face of merciless death was everywhere. One day I went to a small restaurant with a friend. We needed to feel young again and to resist the atrocities of combat that were making us grow old every day. There, in that little restaurant, which refused to let itself be destroyed by military drones, I met the most beautiful woman in the world...".

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At this point in the story, this man, hovering somewhere between maturity and old age, shed two large tears from the corners of his eyes. The tears, now resting on the corners of his mouth, turned his sadness into a smile. As he spoke to me, my mysterious interlocutor was reconstructing in his memory all the moments he had lived with this beautiful stranger whom he had met in a Parisian restaurant a long time ago.

"She spoke one word of English: yes, and I spoke one word of French: oui. It was the perfect relationship. Our eyes spoke and our mouths remained silent in the face of the great love cradled in each other's pupils, a love much more powerful than a thousand words. We learned each other's language together, but we still transmitted everything that was essential through our eyes. We got married a few months after living together as a couple. We had everything we wanted in the world and even a little more. My beautiful Cecile told me one day that she was pregnant. I got used to this extreme happiness, which is always a bad sign in life. Something horrible was going to happen and I knew it in my heart. We were too happy for mere mortals. Our little girl was three months old when she started crying incessantly, with nothing we could do to ease her suffering. We were desperate. One evening, after the doctor's diagnosis, our little girl breathed her last. After this unimaginable misfortune, our life together was marked by grief and remorse. We were no longer the couple that everyone admired.

One morning I found a small note on the bedside table. My wife had gone to her parents' house to escape from the house where we had lived and loved. Alone in this flat, I began to write. It was the only remedy for the pain that burst out of me every day. I wrote about the happiness of having met Cécile,

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about those moments of joy that we felt before suffering robbed us of the ability to live and to love.

When I finished my manuscript, I went to visit my wife at her parents' house. I gave her the book, so that she could read everything that remained inexpressible after the death of our child. I returned to Paris alone, without a manuscript and still without a heart in my chest.

A few weeks passed in the solitude to which I had become accustomed. One day, Cécile returned to Paris, to our home, and suffering was briefly driven out of our flat. I hugged her tightly. I asked her afterwards what she had thought of my book. Red-faced, she realised that she had left the suitcase containing the manuscript in the luggage net on the train.

All that I had written, all that I had felt so strongly during those months spent in solitude was now lost forever. After this incident, I was consumed for a long time by the silence of the blank pages, by their mocking emptiness that deadened my thoughts. But the words always come back to us. It is people themselves who are carried away by their absence...".

Before I could say anything, the man who had spoken so softly to me fled. The only witnesses to our meeting were the pages of the golden manuscript that I held in my still trembling hands. Suddenly, my love for words was awakened. I knew that now I was ready to break the silence that had paralysed my imagination before my visit to Shakespeare & Co. The sorrow of war, the magic of first encounters and irreconcilable death were my companions during the few hours of my discovery of twentieth-century Paris through the voice of this mysterious man.

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Is this book all you are buying today, mademoiselle? I replied: yes. This little word, a banal statement in everyday reality, would have represented for some, like the old man I met that day, a whole language of love. I marvelled at the power of letters and could only smile at my naivety in believing that a blank page would ever be able to silence the echoes of the human soul.

Paris was once again a party.

*Translated with [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator) (free version) (adapted)*

### **QUESTIONS:**

- 1) Why is the narrator sad at the start of the story?
- 2) Do some research on Shakespeare et Compagnie. What kind of shop is this?
- 3) What do you think the man in the bookshop means when he says “I have often been the victim of words”?
- 4) What is the significance of books in the digital era?
- 5) Do you prefer to read a real book or to read on the screen?
- 6) 'Being there, even in the midst of the war, seemed infinitely better than still living in America, in a small town where nothing ever happened.' What do you think of this attitude?