Q. ’French artists of this period were more progressive in their subject matter than their British counterparts’. (30 marks).

A: A number of social and cultural changes occurred during this period across Europe. This resulted in artists having the opportunity to treat these changes as new subjects not previously depicted in art. City life, social issues and the role of women were amongst those topics dealt with in both French and British art.

Courbet’s *The Stone Breakers*, oil on canvas, 1848 is a large scale scene of working life in the Realist style. This scene and its treatment by Courbet were a deliberate break with academic conventions and Courbet has chosen this subject both to highlight the plight of the individuals depicted but also challenge what was being shown at the Paris Salon. Two male figures are shown breaking stones for a road, this task was usually filled by the lowest members of society and such individuals would be seen throughout the country as roads were built to link rural areas to cities.

The large scale of the work, traditionally reserved for historical paintings, gives the subject a sense of importance. An elderly man kneels breaking stones with a pickaxe while behind him a boy struggles to carry a basket filled with stones to one side. Their tattered clothing adds a sense of realism to the scene. They are unidealised, with the faces of both figures shown in profile. This hides their identities showing them as nameless men engaged in the lowest form of labour. Colours are muted, the dull browns of their clothes match the colours of the stones they break. The elder man’s skin is tanned, implying he has done such work for years. A patch of blue sky is visible in the top right corner, this tells us it is early and the men have a full day’s work ahead of them. Courbet has chosen this subject to make the viewers of the time sympathise with the men shown. He treats the men as victims of their time, where the poor were forced to work in harsh conditions, labour which the social commentator Proudhon described as devouring ‘the generations in their youth’. By contrast in Britain, Ford Madox Brown’s painting ‘Work’ shows a similar scene of manual labour, however the workers are represented as heroic and bettering society rather than victims of it.

Renoir’s *Bal du Moulin de la Galette*, 1876, oil on canvas, is an Impressionist scene of everyday life. A large crowd of figures are shown outdoors in an open air dancehall on a sunny day. Renoir’s focus here is on the effects of light falling on figures and forms. Such contemporary scenes without any social commentary were new to art. Renoir and the Impressionists follows the advice of Baudelaire who encouraged painters to ‘become one flesh with the crowd’. This meant artists should experience everyday life and paint it first-hand, a new approach at that time.

To achieve this, Renoir painted the work en plein air. His focus is on colour and light effects in a large composition. Foreground figures including a table with seated male figures are shown in conversation with young women. Their faces are sketched in a simplified way to suggest movement as if Renoir has caught a brief moment. Similarly the forms of dancing figures in the background are likewise vaguely outlined. Sunlight streams through the leaves and falls as dappled patches of yellow and pink light on the shoulders of man standing beneath a tree. Blue shadows appear throughout the scene, on the white dress of a figure in the centre. This treatment of light is typical of the Impressionists who referenced recent scientific colour research. Thick dabs of white paint act as highlights on the glass objects such as a bottle on the foreground table. Renoir links the scene with yellow in the hair of the blonde girls and the straw hats worn by men who all appear across the scene. Colour and light have become the subject in this scene of social life. Unlike in Britain, where ‘Derby Day’ by Powell Frith uses satire and social commentary to critique the various figures who appear at a large social gathering, typical of Victorian art at that time.

In Britain artists looked to the past for subject matters which they presented in a new way. *Ophelia* by Millais, oil on canvas, 1851, in the Pre-Raphaelite style, shows the female character Ophelia from Shakespeare’s Hamlet as she drowns in a river. Scenes from literature were a popular subject, however Millais treats the scene in avant-garde manner. This is the first time in art that the actual death of Ophelia is depicted. Having being rejected by her lover Hamlet, Ophelia is driven to despair and whilst picking flowers she falls in a river but allows herself to drown. This is precisely what Millais shows.

Ophelia is placed centrally and sinking beneath the river water, around her we see various natural forms. The willow near her references the scene’s description in the play and Millais went to great lengths to capture this scene as accurately as possible. Typical of the Pre-Raphaelites, Millais painted the scene outdoors, a decade before French artists such as the Impressionists worked plein-air. The Pre-Raphaelites followed the advice of Ruskin who advised painters to ‘go to nature’ rejecting nothing, selecting nothing’. As a result we see decaying weeds which might link to the theme of death but which also give the scene a sense of realism rather than idealism. Flowers float on the surface of the river and have symbolic meaning. Roses represent beauty, poppies signify death and daisies symbolise innocence. These all refer to Ophelia’s character. The bright reds, pinks and yellows of these flowers draw our eye to them to emphasise their symbolic meaning. Ophelia’s pale face and hands likewise stand out against the dark brown river. Such colour effects were achieved by applying paint to a wet white background, a new technique in painting. Despite Millais taking a traditional subject he paints it in an entirely new way for the period and some of his techniques would be used by later artists across Britain and France. Similarly Waterhouse’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’, 1888, depicts a female character from a poem by Tennyson and through plein-air painting and looser brushwork gives the Pre-Raphaelite work an Impressionist appearance.

I would therefore argue that from my chosen examples, French artists were more progressive in subject matter by addressing themes or issues not seen before in art. However British artists invented new techniques in painting to make their traditional subjects appear avant-garde.