

Considering thérèse as a criminal



Whether Mauriac presents Therese Desqueroux to the reader as a criminal, must provoke the exploration of whether she is responsible, both morally and self-consciously, for her actions in committing that crime. There are instances in the novel, not just associated with Therese, where we see characters who do have control over their actions or at least claim that every action derives from a reason, like Bernard, and those instances where it is implied, and the reader is led to infer, that Therese is lost and ambivalent as to why she attempted to poison Bernard.

On the one hand, Therese is surrounded by Bernard, who is conditioned by his setting and class to believing there are rigid ways of living and thinking, and who, because of this, believes everyone should easily explain their actions, and thus Therese should simply confess her reasoning, and live as a criminal. On top of this, Therese is perceived as at times appearing cruel to Bernard, calculating, and fascinated with the poisoning. However, Therese is perhaps presented as pitiable and innocent when she cannot find a reason for her actions, proving herself to be a complicated character amidst simplistic Bourgeois society, in which she is merely subject to a series of random events.

Therese could be considered as a criminal due to the contrast other characters make with her concerning the way in which she views self-understanding and autonomy. Bernard, in particular, believes that everything that happens is linked with the person who committed that action, and thus people must have motives. He comments that “ on n’est jamais malheureux que par sa faute” (“ one is never unhappy except by one’s own fault”) when referencing the reason as to why Therese and

Bernard married; he believes that because of certain factors, in this case their wealth and pines, means that the resultant action happened. Thus this angles towards the concept that Therese must have a malicious reason for her actions against Therese, rendering her a criminal. Bernard also always acts impulsively and finds a quick cause of action knowing that the reason for his perhaps dubiously moral and antagonistic acts, are always focussed on the interest of maintaining an image, like when he says “ il sait toujours, en toute circonstance, ce qu’il convient de faire dans l’interet de la famille” (“ he always knows, in all circumstances, what should be done in the interest of the family “) after he abuses Anne and locks her away for having a fleeting relationship with Jean Azevedo. Here, we see Bernard, much like Therese, showing hostility, yet knowing a reason for it and thus condoning the perspective of Therese as a criminal since she must have a motive. Interestingly, the existentialist-esque Jean Azevedo supports this concept of ‘ explanation for action’ with his philosophy of life which is “ chaque minute doit apporter sa joie” (“ each minute must bring one’s joy”). The fact that Jean does everything which the desired outcome to be joy and happiness for example when he seeks the transient relationship with Anne for pleasure, like how Bernard has it for protection of his family honor, surely condemns Therese even more as a criminal as she struggles to even come up with a reason for her acts. Whereas Jean and Bernard have reasons for their actions in life which might exonerate perhaps immoral or promiscuous behavior, Therese is left with the void of an inability to explain herself.

Equally, Therese is portrayed as having a fascination with the concept of poisoning her husband, as well as being presented as a woman of

intelligence, with a calculating nature, which could lead towards the idea of a cognitive, measured approach to the poisoning of Bernard. Indeed, when she first sees Bernard accidentally put too many arsenic drops in his water on the day of the forest fire, she then continues to add them for him and describes it as a “tentation horrible” (“Horrible temptation”), which presents the reader with a psychopathic sense of addiction and allure which helps present Therese in a bad light as criminal. Mauriac writes that “l’intelligence de Thérèse était fameuse” (“the intelligence of Therese was famous”) and Bernard feels threatened that his future wife will be more intelligent than him, and this constructs the depiction of her as being situationally calculating and conceptually curious; perhaps a reason for her poisoning? She mocks Bernard, showing a cruelty and an underlying side of hatred in her, when he worries about his health due to the history his family has, “mais il n’est pas malade: on prend seulement des précautions, à cause des malheurs qu’il y a eu dans sa famille” (“but he is not ill: we are only taking precautions because of the illnesses that there were in his family”), and this playing on his hypochondria could mean that she is perceived as being unsympathetic, and worthy of being condemned.

Yet, we must not forget that Mauriac depicts Therese as a woman with different objectives in life to those of the people who she is surrounded by and the society within which she lives, and therefore can a woman, out of place, condemned to life of monotony and indifference, be found culpable for the actions which perhaps the condition of her setting and the people she is amongst have forced her to do? Mauriac in his epigraph indicates that Therese is very different to normal humans and the way they approach life, “

Seigneur, ayez pitié, ayez pitié des fous et des folles!” (“ Lord, have mercy, have pity on madmen and fools”) , and this, taken from a Baudelaire poem, highlights a sense of the reader needing to forgive and pity a woman for her actions and not condemn them just because she contests the expectations made of women. Mauriac also references “ Sainte Locuste” (“ Saint Locust”) a woman who was a renowned poisoner in Nero’s court, yet was made a Sainte, highlighting Mauriac’s own sentimentalities that although Therese committed the act of poisoning, she should not be condemned as she did it out of her differences to the community, as she is arguably not socially engineered like when she shows a lack of interest in wanting to build a bond with her baby, and it is her differences that we should celebrate.

She implicitly shows these differences to societal form when, towards the end of the novel in Paris, Bernard asks her to confess to the reason as to why she poisoned him since he believes “ naturellement a cause des pins” (“ naturally because of the pines”) in his rigid, customary thought process, and she replies, “ Un homme comme vous, Bernard, connaît toujours toutes les raisons de ses actes” (“ A man like you, Bernard, always knows all the reasons for his actions”) which has the connotation of him blindly conforming to the prescribed precepts, and only Therese can see that this is all the Bourgeois society in Argelouse do. This recognition of the differences and the resultant dissociation strengthens the argument that she could be acquitted as a criminal as she poisoned Bernard as she felt entrapped within a society and a place which she is adverse to. Her description of Bernard as a simplistic man (“ la race implacable des simples” (“ the relentless race of simple beings”)) further develops our sense that she is distant in character

and intelligence, which could lead us to exonerating her as a criminal as we sympathize with her desire to escape the consecrated, life-time incarceration in Argelouse, to the liberty of Paris, as she describes it at the end of the novel, “ la foule des hommes après la foule des arbres” (“ the crowd of men after the crowd of trees”). Indeed the reclusive, restrictive surroundings of Argelouse might help exonerate her from her criminality, since she despises the fact that “ Argelouse est réellement une extrémité de la terre” (“ Argelouse really is an extremity of the earth”), and the symbol of the pines come to stand as the bars for her prison. Indeed, when it rains, the droplets resemble “ ses millions de barreaux mouvants” (“ millions of moving bars”), and all her surroundings come to stand for something she wishes to flee from; that brings on her melancholy. Therese falls victim arguably to the representation as a passive agent, subject to a series of random circumstances for which she cannot be blamed, like when on the day of the forest fire, tempers and stress levels are high with Bernard, and “ Elle ne se souvient d’aucun incident, d’aucune dispute” (“ She does not remember any incident, any dispute”) as if there was no particular reason for her to start poisoning Bernard, but that it was a series of providential moments out of her control which lead to it.

Furthermore, the fact that Therese, on several occasions, attempts to formulate a reason as to why she poisoned Bernard, yet finds nothing tangible or even convincing, perhaps makes her appear more pitiable as a lost figure and thus less villainous as she meant no malice or vindictive outcome. When she is on her way back from the trial and thinks about what she will to say to Bernard, she thinks “ rien a dire pour sa defense” (“

nothing to say for her defense”) as if to reveal the fact she has no motive, thus strangely rendering her innocent. Mauriac presents the crime of poisoning Bernard as almost innate within Therese, when, sitting at a hot lunch, he comments “ l’acte qui...était déjà en elle à son insu” (“ The act that ... was already in her without her knowledge”), to convey the feeling that it is an inescapable, irreversible part of her that she has to accept, yet perhaps fails to acknowledge, which leads her to the conclusion that “ Moi, je ne connais pas mes crimes” (“ Me, I did not understand my crimes”).

The fact that Therese committed the poisoning is certain, but the way she is presented to us as a criminal, as to whether she should be pitied or despised, is at times ambiguous. The tone of Mauriac persuades us to acknowledge her as a pitiable figure, who perhaps is more innocent and less of a criminal, who seeks implicitly the idea of redemption, like when she says she might have gone back with Bernard if he had forgiven her. Indeed, we see her manipulative, calculating intelligence at work, and her mockery of her husband, yet we see far more brutal actions from the Bourgeois conformist Bernard, which are arguably more criminal. And thus it is the crux of the argument that Therese is a woman of a different breed to the society she is suffocated by: she has different interests, a higher intellectual ability, and a curiosity to explore unknown paths. I feel it is this that ultimately renders her act as a mistake rather than a crime, as it was due to something innate within her, a desire to explore, which the others do not possess, yet neither she nor Argelouse recognize as the reason for her acts which is the greater tragedy.