

Candidate 2

How does Delphine de Vigan portray No as a pitiable character in 'No et Moi'?

The novel 'No et Moi' by Delphine de Vigan explores the unlikely friendship of 13 year old Lou Bertignac, the narrator, who is intellectually gifted (with an IQ of 160) yet emotionally immature, and No (Nolven), an 18 year old mentally unstable SDF. Their relationship forms after a school assignment on homelessness leads Lou to interviewing No at Austerlitz train station, where she frequents to observe people and their emotions. No's behaviour is erratic. At times throughout the novel, she shows determination to progress with her life, taking positive actions such as finding employment to escape homelessness. However, she is volatile, turning to drugs and alcohol to numb the memories of her painful past and present. Her changing personality makes No an ambiguous character who the reader reacts to with mixed emotions. Overall, she generates much sadness and sympathy as a result of her unfortunate circumstances living for years on the streets, which causes the reader to understand why she behaves and acts in such an explosive manner. Therefore, this essay will demonstrate that No is extremely pitiable as she has been neglected for so many years, trapped in a meaningless routine that seems unescapable. This hopelessness causes her to act hostile and defensive even towards those who try to help her as she herself does not believe her situation will improve.

Chapter one gives the reader a useful insight into her pitiful circumstances. On their first encounter, No is painted by the author as a character in a desperate state- this is shown through the description of her unattractive appearance, "*elle portait un pantalon kaki sale, un vieux blouson troué aux coudes...*"¹ which hints at her abandonment. Furthermore, after some conversation No claims that she hasn't eaten since yesterday, asking Lou for money which indicates that No is impoverished and likely homeless as she is alone and cannot even afford to meet her basic necessities. After returning home, Lou reflects on No, remarking, "*elle avait l'air si jeune*"², this generates sympathy for her as her youth makes it seem wrong for her to be entirely alone. This also allows the reader to question No's troubling family life as no one appears to care for her wellbeing.

The chapter concludes with Lou's view that "*il m'avait semblé qu'elle connaissait vraiment la vie, ou plutôt qu'elle connaissait de la vie quelque chose qui faisait peur*"³. Lou believes that No is wise in the way that she understands the hardships of life, an insight that Lou hasn't gained as she is still a child who can depend on her parents, whereas No appears neglected and therefore had to learn to survive alone and grow-up prematurely. This creates a pitiable image as No has been deprived of her youth, whilst others continue their education, or enjoy spending time with friends, No doesn't have any prospects and her life merely involves survival. This quote also suggests No's apparent sadness as well as the pity which is generated from Lou, the encounter having deeply affected her.

¹ Pg16, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

² Pg20, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

³ Pg20, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

No's volatility results in her acting aggressively, which makes her less sympathetic. This is exemplified on her second encounter with Lou. No is slumped against a post with a tuna tin posed at her feet, when Lou approaches to greet her. No replies "*tiens, Lou Bertignac*"⁴ however her tone isn't warm or welcoming. "*Elle a dit ça sur un ton hautain, celui qu'on utilise pour imiter les gens un peu snobs... j'ai failli faire marche arrière...*"⁵. This portrays No as intimidating, causing Lou to become fearful to the extent that she considers leaving. Lou further says, "*j'aurais bien voulu lui poser des questions, mais j'étais trop intimidée*"⁶, highlighting this. Contrarily, her tone is understandable as to No, Lou must appear privileged and she therefore speaks out of envy of her life, making No pitiable as she has not had the same advantages in life as Lou, making her resentful as she feels unjustly treated in comparison.

Only when Lou invites No for a drink, "*elle se lève d'un bond*"⁷, she appears eager as there is drink involved, so she gains something from the encounter, she regards Lou, "*comme si elle cherchait un truc ...*"⁸. However, Lou's fear at the idea of being alone with her is clear when she says, "*et pourtant je suis morte de peur à l'idée de me retrouver en face d'elle*"⁹.

At the café, No orders a vodka and then another, this illustrates her dependence on drugs to numb her anguish, as she is also a smoker, asking Lou for a cigarette when they first meet. Later in the novel, she is also caught taking pills on various occasions as well as cleaning out the medical cabinet before leaving Lou's house which shows her desperation to escape her unsatisfying life.

Moreover, when the waiter hesitates about to ask for her age, "*elle soutient son regard avec une insolence incroyable, ça veut dire ne me fais pas chier connard*"¹⁰. Delphine de Vigan's choice of familiar language is effective here in showing No's background and the class difference between No and Lou. This also highlights her aggressive nature as well as her frustration regarding her childish appearance. No is physically very thin, appearing malnourished. This becomes evident later in the novel when she is bathed by Lou, who describes the fragility of her frame which emphasises her mistreatment as she has been continuously denied her basic human rights to adequate food and shelter, a trauma that no human being should have to endure.

No's self-hatred is further shown by her response to others and the attention they give her, acting out to protect herself. Lou explains that she can't stand when people look at her, potentially as she is aware of her neglected appearance which labels her as an outcast of society. "*Elle ne supporte pas que les gens la regardent, au café c'est pareil, si quelqu'un se retourne elle ne tarde jamais à l'envoyer*

⁴ Pg24, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

⁵ Pg24, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

⁶ Pg18, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

⁷ Pg24, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

⁸ Pg18, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

⁹ Pg25, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹⁰ Pg26, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

promener, tu veux ma photo ou qu'est-ce qu'elle a ma guelle?"¹¹ These violent outbursts show her insecurity and vulnerability. Just like an animal at the zoo, she may feel she is viewed as an exhibition rather than a human being, as No believes, *"il me semble qu'elle est arrivée au bout..."*¹²

Her mental instability also makes her unpredictable, meaning Lou sometimes doesn't see her for days and feels that each encounter may be their last. No likely distrusts that Lou will remain present in her life as she has been abandoned by many others. As a result, she may want to avoid getting too attached to Lou as she will be hurt once she leaves which explains her erratic behaviour towards her.

In an interview by W2BFrance, Julie-Marie Parmentier who plays No, describes her character as emotionally immature, as if she has never grown up. The actor believes she is almost backwards in her ability to communicate and in her relations with others as if something is broken in her. This is reflected by the novel when she acts defensively, appearing not to understand social conduct and mirroring the vulnerability of a child and not the young adult that she is.

After No moves in with Lou and her parents, No has a very positive effect on the family, especially on Anouk (Lou's mother) and we see a contrasting side of her personality. She starts to participate in household chores, *"elle a proposé à ma mère de faire les courses, de descendre les poubelles, de participer à la préparation des repas"*¹³. This presents No positively as it shows her desire to contribute to the household and make herself useful by helping out, as a way of showing her gratitude.

Very quickly No becomes accepted into the family, and her presence has a significant impact on Lou's mother who became severely depressed after the death of her infant daughter, Thaïs, rarely getting out of bed or engaging with Lou. Yet after No's arrival, she starts to live normally again, *"(elle) a recommencé à feuilleter des magazines...Elle s'habille, se coiffe, se maquille..."*¹⁴, De Vigan uses a list to highlight the extent of her recovery, she partakes in normal tasks that were previously impossible. However, No tells Lou, *"Je serai jamais de ta famille"*¹⁵. This makes her pitiable as despite her best efforts to become a part of the family, she will always feel like an outsider, who does not belong in a conventional family environment.

The ending of the novel effectively illustrates the complexity of No's personality. No is forced out of Lucas' home and as Lou feels that she can't abandon her, she packs her bag and leaves home to unite with No. They plan to take the train to Saint- Lazare, until Cherbourg before taking the ferry to Ireland to join Loïc, with whom No had a fleeting romance. This emphasises Lou's trust in No, in that she is willing to leave everything behind to accompany her, even when she becomes homesick and misses her loving parents.

¹¹ Pg64, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹² Pg102, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹³ Pg123, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹⁴ Pg134, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹⁵ Pg174, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

Worryingly to Lou, No spends a lot of money on food, clothes, as well as a hotel for the night but Lou's financial concerns are dismissed with, "*t'inquiète pas pour ça*"¹⁶. At the train station, No rises to buy tickets, taking the suitcase with her. Even after many hours, Lou's blind faith in No leads to her wholehearted belief in her return, "*parce qu'elle ne pouvait pas être partie sans moi. J'ai attendu parce que j'avais peur qu'on se perde*"¹⁷.

Eventually, Lou comes to the shocking realisation that No has left without her, leaving her devastated. No is shown to be selfish, as she betrays Lou's trust when the reader is made to believe that they care deeply for each other. It also explains why she doesn't show Lou how much money remained in the envelope, as there was only enough for her. This suggests that No had planned to betray Lou. Alternatively, No's actions could be interpreted as good natured. No may have decided to leave Lou to protect her, as she did not want to drag Lou down with her, even if she would have appreciated her companionship. Therefore on the surface what she did was selfish, however upon deeper analysis No is trying to shelter Lou from the hardships faced by the homeless.

In conclusion, No is a largely pitiable character. Although at times she acts violently, this is more with the intention of protecting others than causing harm. No is an isolated, neglected youth who acts aggressively and selfishly as a means of self-defence, as she is used to having solely herself to depend upon and is mistrustful of others. Whilst her life takes a positive turn as her bond with Lou strengthens, this quickly relapses when she returns to homelessness and her final departure emphasises that No is unable to fully feel loved. Therefore, as she feels too excluded from society for anyone to understand her situation, No is a pitiable character who appears too damaged, mentally and emotionally, to have a progressive life.

Bibliography

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Interview- W2BFrance- No et moi- Rencontre avec Zabou Breitman et les acteurs!-

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=PT_5cFeWLU

¹⁶ Pg238, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

¹⁷ Pg242, De Vigan, Delphine, No et Moi, Jean- Claude Lattès, 2007

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