

Candidate 3

To what extent does the reader sympathise with the protagonist, Thérèse, in François Mauriac's 'Thérèse Desqueyroux'?

Thérèse Desqueyroux is a novel that tells the story of a young Catholic bourgeoisie who has been acquitted for attempting to poison her husband. It traces Thérèse's adolescence and then her exile in the country as she embarks on a search for her identity, which has been lost amidst the repressive roles burdened on her by her father, husband and the rigid societal customs of the time. Throughout the book, the reader must grapple with moments where her crime must be frowned upon, and moments where intense pity and empathy is felt for this troubled woman. The protagonist herself does not fully understand her motivations, therefore, it is up to the reader to decide whether her actions are to be condemned or comprehended. The reader must determine whether Mauriac portrays Thérèse as a 'monster' or if the protagonist wins the sympathy of the reader through the suffering that she endures.

In order to decide whether Thérèse's actions can be pardoned, it is important to understand the broader context of the social situation of women after WW1. The novel is based in the 1920s, and during this period, there were two types of women. Firstly, there was '*la femme moderne*' or '*la garçonne*' which embodied a woman who abandoned convention.¹ This modern woman lived for herself and despised the traditional roles, symbolizing immorality. In contrast, there was "*la mère de famille nombreuse*"² which epitomized a saint-like and dutiful woman. Thérèse belongs to the category of the reviled '*femme moderne*'. Consequently, she becomes an unhappy woman who attempts to break out of an artificial existence. The empathy towards Thérèse is introduced by Mauriac, himself, in the foreword, "*Thérèse, beaucoup diront que tu n'existe pas. Mais, je sais que tu existes.*"³ The author expresses an understanding of who she is when others cannot comprehend what she is going through, establishing the question of sympathy from the beginning.

The reader must decide whether to continue the author's sympathy towards Thérèse. It is hinted that Thérèse has evil or malicious traits, which is implied as "*une curiosité un peu dangereuse à satisfaire.*"⁴ 'Curiosité' merely suggests a simple desire or interest, however, contrasted with 'dangereuse', it emphasises her wicked and villainous attributes, foreshadowing a perilous outcome. As the novel continues, Mauriac expands this 'monstrosity',

*"jamais Thérèse ne connut une telle paix- ce qu'elle croyait être la paix et qui n'était que le demi-sommeil, l'engourdissement de ce reptile dans son sein."*⁵

The imagery of the 'reptile' develops the image through its peaceful sleeping, creating a sinister and ominous atmosphere. Thérèse's malevolent side becomes further solidified to the reader through her lack of maternal feelings towards Marie, her newborn child. During and after her pregnancy, there is an absence of genuine love towards her offspring, as she refuses to show affection, forcing Anne, her

¹ Leno, O. (2017). *Holy monstrosity: A study of François Mauriac's Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Available at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/84312475.pdf> (Accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

² Ibid.,

³ Mauriac, F. (1927). *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. Paris: Grasset.

⁴ Ibid., pg99

⁵ Ibid., pg48

sister-in-law, to take on the role of carer. It is stated that, "*Thérèse, à ce moment de sa vie, se sentait détachée de sa fille comme de tout le reste.*"⁶ The lack of motherly instinct highlights her lack of overall sentiment, expanding the image of a 'monstre' and distancing Thérèse further from the reader.

Thérèse's 'monstrosity' can be traced back to her childhood, highlighting that her evilness is innate rather than a product of her environment and society. Thérèse states that,

*"je jouissais du mal que je causais et de celui qui me venait de mes amies; pure souffrance qu'aucun remords n'altérerait: douleurs et joies naissaient des plus innocents plaisirs."*⁷

Thérèse gains pleasure from the suffering of her friends which she has induced, showing the presence of her psychopathic tendencies during her adolescence. Therefore, Mauriac successfully creates an atmosphere in which the reader must denounce her actions, by showing Thérèse's 'monstrosity', which is the desire to hurt others from a very young age. Thérèse's desire to inflict suffering continues as she commits a criminal act which decreases our sympathy further. She poisons her husband with his own medication, causing him to become significantly ill, forcing us to condemn her actions. Additionally, Thérèse is shown to be enjoying the consequences of the poisoning as she consciously knows the source of his illness, however, she does not inform anyone and allows him to continue suffering, as stated, "*le docteur, Pedemay l'interrogea sur les incidents de la journée, elle ne dit rien de ce qu'elle avait vu à table.*"⁸ Her feeling of pleasure from the suffering of others is again highlighted. Thérèse's sociopathic tendencies and lack of compassion can be traced throughout her life, thus, the reader has no choice but to lose all sympathy for the protagonist.

However, it must not be forgotten that sympathy may be required for Thérèse after experiencing a lifetime of oppression. Mauriac uses first person narrative to achieve this as the events are shared from her perspective, meaning her circumstance and suffering can be clearly understood as a direct link is established between the protagonist and the reader. Through this narrative, our sympathy is developed as we are quickly introduced to Thérèse's repressive world. We learn that her father treats her as an inferior and teaches her the expected behaviour of women in French society.

*"Il faut que vous soyez comme les deux doigts de la main...comme les deux doigts de la main, entends-tu?...Tu feras tout ce que ton mari te dira de faire."*⁹

Her father is authoritative and demanding as he uses several words that exude the desire to control. "*Il faut que*" suggests that it is necessary for Thérèse to be submissive to her husband. The use of the simple future tense suggests that Thérèse's future is decided, creating a sense of finality. The protagonist has no power to establish her own destiny, emphasising how the power of authority has robbed her of self-determination, inducing sympathy.

Thérèse is also dismissed by other male figures in her life such as her husband, Bernard. Throughout the novel, she is portrayed as being significantly unhappy in her marriage as she does not feel any

⁶ Ibid., pg96

⁷ Ibid., pg37

⁸ Ibid., pg98

⁹ Ibid., pg30

form of sexual attraction or emotional attachment, as it is merely a marriage of convenience. For example,

“Thérèse se souvient qu’elle avait fermé les yeux, tandis que deux grandes mains enserraient sa petite tête, et qu’une voix disait contre son oreille: ‘il y a là encore quelques idées fausses.’ Elle avait répondu: ‘À vous de les détruire, Bernard.’”¹⁰

‘*Deux grandes mains*’ emphasises how male authority covers her eyes and oppresses her. However, it also emphasises her desire to fit in and fulfil her role. Accordingly, the verb ‘*enserrer*’ has connotations of one being held tightly, giving the effect of control and an attempt to overpower. This invokes sympathy as we see that she has no source of affection or love from her family or partner, therefore, it can be said that the failure of the most important people in her life to understand or to love her leads her to crime.

Thérèse’s passive existence under male authority is further enforced by her submissive role in society, opening up the possibility that she chooses to poison her husband as she cannot stand her reality as a ‘*mère de famille*’. She constantly dreams of being a ‘*femme moderne*’ as she has a desire to be different and her family is unwilling to allow this freedom, thus, she begins to detest her life as a woman and dreams of a different life.

“Elle apercevait les êtres et les choses et son propre corps et son esprit même, ainsi qu’un mirage, une vapeur suspendue en dehors d’elle... Sortir du monde... Mais comment ? et où aller ?”¹¹

The verb ‘*apercevoir*’ emphasises that she cannot recognise herself and is passively passing through life. Mauriac expresses her loss of identity through the rhetorical questions, indicating her desperation for answers and a way to escape which reflects her lack of social place. Thérèse considers her life to be insignificant, giving us a deeper understanding of her suffering as the reader can sympathise with this forced existence that she must endure. Consequently, Thérèse feels trapped which is shown through the metaphor of a cage, “*elle était entrée somnambule dans la cage.*”¹² This feeling of confinement gives her little room to explore her own identity as she is forced to exist according to a man’s definition. Therefore, it is understandable that she turns to crime and violence in order to oppose the values that are imposed on her, but, most importantly, fight to live by her own definition, generating sympathy from the reader.

Overall, the novel takes the reader on a journey to decide whether the protagonist deserves our sympathy or if her criminal actions are to be condemned. Mauriac effectively shows that Thérèse cannot be forgiven as she commits a heinous criminal act and feels no remorse after as she does nothing to diminish Bernard’s suffering. However, it is important to determine if this ‘monstrosity’ is a product of her society or if Thérèse is inherently evil as her desire to hurt others can be traced back to her childhood. It can be concluded that her wickedness is a response to a lifetime of suffering from society and the passivity that she must endure under her family. The act of poisoning indirectly becomes an act of self defense against these two ‘monstrous’ forces. Thérèse does whatever she can to

¹⁰ Ibid., pg48

¹¹ Ibid., pg96

¹² Ibid., pg49

preserve her identity and evade her position as a victim against the 'monstrous' society. However, at the end of the book, it can be argued that Thérèse becomes free. After being 'locked up' her whole life by society, but also by her family at Argelouse, she is incapable of fulfilling her own destiny. However, Bernard allows her to move to Paris, giving her the opportunity to find her purpose. Overall, the reader must be sympathetic towards the protagonist as her criminality and actions are a reaction against the existing structure of violent suppression among the Desqueyroux and French society of the time. Mauriac, himself, states that, "*if the flame inside you goes out, the souls next to you will die of cold*"¹³, therefore, like Thérèse we must not let our fire die out as we must fight for our freedom and identity even if it comes at a cost, as the suffering from the struggle for liberation pales in comparison to the pain of remaining docile to oppressive values. We must always fight for the preservation of our identity regardless of the consequences.

¹³ A-Z Quotes. (n.d.). *Francois Mauriac Quote*. Available at: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1262409> (Accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

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Thérèse Desqueyroux. (2012). [film] Directed by C. Miller.

Word Count:
1499 excluding quotations
1726 including quotations

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Portfolio option (please tick (✓) <u>one</u> option only)		
Literature	✓	
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