

MAURIAC, FRANCOIS

Francois Mauriac, the importance. Francois Mauriac (1885-1970) was a French novelist, essay writer, journalist, and defender of the Catholic Church, who lived through and recorded almost a century of change in French culture and society. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for fiction in 1952.

Francois Mauriac, the life and writings. Francois Mauriac was born in Bordeaux. His father was an upper middle class banker, who died when Francois was eighteen months old. That death left Francois' mother with five children, of whom Francois was the youngest. The atmosphere in the family of youngsters appears to have been exceptionally protective, and for Francois the protective mode was sustained when he went off to school with the Marianist sisters. In 1905 Francois went to the University of Bordeaux, where he studied literature, then moved to Paris, in preparation for study at the prestigious Ecole des Chartes. Instead of continuing with advanced research, however, Mauriac decided to throw in his lot with writing, and achieved his first limited attention with the publication of *Les Mains Jointes* (1909), *Joined Hands*, a volume of poetry. A novel, *Le Baiser aux Lépreux* (1922), *The Lepers' Kiss*, drew further attention to Mauriac's accomplishment. Later fictional work was to establish Mauriac as a major national figure; especially through *Le Désert de l'Amour* (1925), *The Desert of Love*, and *Le Noeud de Vipères* (1932), *The Nest of Vipers*. (It was on the basis of such works that Mauriac was elected to the *Académie française* (1933), awarded the Nobel Prize in 1952, and in 1958 awarded the Grand Croix of the Légion d'honneur.

Mauriac as Public Figure. Nor was it only through these writings that Mauriac was becoming a culture shaping figure in post War France. He was involved in a couple of high profile debates, which concerned issues of burning importance to French consciousness of the time. One of these debates was between Mauriac and the celebrated Resistance figure and novelist, Albert Camus. This debate, which was carried on in the press, Mauriac writing in *Le Figaro*, Camus in the newspaper *Combat*, concerned the policy of the French government, in post War time, toward former French Nazi collaborators or sympathizers—or at the extreme simply of those who went about their business under the Occupation, without protesting. (It was Mauriac's conviction that a complete purge was impossible and impractical, and that one should learn to live in a compromised and healing society.) A second equally conspicuous debate was carried on between Mauriac and Roger Peyrefitte; and like the earlier debate was carried on publically in the press. Peyrefitte, an aggressive critic of the Vatican, made serious allegations against that institution in a popular book of 1953. Mauriac, whose roots and practice were Catholic, took up arms for the Church, and defended her in the pages of *L'Express*. Nor was this the last public intervention of his career, for in the spirit of many French intellectuals—Valéry, Sartre, Camus—Mauriac felt called on to adopt an active position toward the central events of the day. He was, for example, to write fiercely against French interventions in Viet Nam, and French torture in Algeria.

The religious tone in Mauriac. Mauriac is customarily thought of as a Catholic writer but, like his fellow Catholic Graham Greene, in England, he brings out the religious thematic through a portrait of the dark sides of life. In *The Desert of Love* he portrays a wasting love triangle among a woman, her father, and her son. In *The Nest of Vipers* he lets an aging and bitter man, who has great insight into human failure, write a corrosive letter in which the rottenness of their family is rather inspiringly given prominence.

Reading

Primary source reading

Therese Desqueyroux, tr. M. and R. MacKenzie, 2006.

Secondary source reading

Sowerwine, Charles, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics, and Society*, 2001.

Further reading

God and Mammon and What was Lost, tr. MacKenzie, 2003.

Original language reading

Mauriac, Francois, De Gaulle, 1964.

Suggested paper topics

Do you see a bond between Mauriac's public journalist life, with the high profile issues in which he engaged, and the themes of his fiction? Reflect on that relation in terms of *The Nest of Vipers*, which at first glance appears a darkly psychological text.

Does Mauriac seem to you to be a 'Catholic' writer? What role do 'Catholic' themes play in his writing? What 'Catholic' stances did he adopt as a public figure?

Excerpt

<http://www.wf-f.org/02-1-Mauriac.html>

After the short Vespers of Holy Thursday, the officiating priests strip the altar of all ornaments and recite meanwhile the twenty-first* Psalm with the choir. It is the Psalm of which the first verse was cried out by the dying Christ: "O God, my God...why hast Thou forsaken me"?

The evangelists did not falter before this apparent acknowledgement of defeat, and no doubt it was necessary that the chalice be drunk to the dregs, even to this total abandonment. At that minute, nothing but vanquished humanity appeared any longer in Christ.

How could the Son of God have believed Himself to be forsaken? Had He not known and accepted His martyrdom beforehand? He knew it, without doubt, and He also knew that everything that was happening in that moment had been prophesied in that very twenty-first Psalm, the first verse of which He was crying out to His Father.

None of the scribes, who at the foot of the Cross were shaking their heads and scoffing at the dying victim, thought of drawing a parallel between the desperate appeal which opens this Psalm and what follows: "All they that saw me have laughed me to scorn; they have spoken with the lips and wagged the head. He hoped in the Lord, let him deliver him: let Him save him, seeing He delighteth in him".

But then was it not precisely the same mockery which the chief priests and rulers had just used against Jesus crucified? Were they not laughing at Him because, having saved others, He could not save Himself? Were they not challenging Him to come down from the Cross because He said He was the Son of God?

But, above all, they who knew the Scriptures should have remembered verses seventeen through nineteen, which were being confirmed at that very moment in an astonishing manner: "They have pierced my hands and feet. They have numbered all my bones. They parted my garments amongst them and upon my vesture they cast lots."

And this twenty-first Psalm, which begins with a cry of doubt and distress, ends with the promise of a triumph that the Crucified alone was to achieve. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and shall be converted to the Lord: and all the kindred of the Gentiles shall adore in His sight. For the Kingdom is the Lord's; and He shall have dominion over the nations."