

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Diary of a Country Priest 1951

Robert Bresson. 1901-1999

STORY

The spiritual theme of Bresson's film, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), was drawn from a novel (1936) of the same name by the French writer, Georges Bernanos. At first, Bresson decided to rely on the writing team of Jean Auroche and Pierre Bost, widely thought the experts in writing up fictions for screen play, but at that point Bernanos himself intervened, insisting that the dialogue in this somber film was all wrong.

Acting. Bresson chose actors for the film-- which like Bernanos' dialogues contravened everything familiar, at the time, about the growing star system of the film industry—over whom he could exercise a totally shaping influence. (He was interested in preparing these often little known actors, by immersing them in situations an upcoming film would oblige them to play; not, he insisted, that his actors would have mastered the gestures of this or that profession, but that the ways to move in this or that milieu were to be mastered, that the general model of behavior would be evoked by a relatively innocent actor.)

Innocence. As preparation for playing the role of the priest, Charles Laydu, a relatively inexperienced actor, was asked to live for a year among a group of priests. The intention, to restate it, was not to indoctrinate him in the priestly vocation—Bresson himself was a non believer, a humanist concerned with ways man survives his life, and nothing more—but to acquaint him with the behavioral styles of the priest, to allow his self-expression to reach a certain spirituality along that path. 'Bresson does not aim for psychological acting, but for an acting style in which the actor represents his character physically—without the self-awareness or involvement that reflects a knowledge of the character beyond his immediate existence.' The result is often a kind of robotic acting stiffness, which has been praised for its other-worldly power, and criticized for its stiffness.

Events. The major events scattered throughout the *Diary of a country priest* are recorded by the priest in a diary in which at crucial times he can be seen writing the days of his life. Given the innocence and lack of worldly understanding, which characterize this young priest, it is no wonder that his experience of his first parish is one of loss, pain, and maladjustment. The parish—and here we talk provincial French seeped in Catholic religious-agricultural background—is on the whole unfriendly to the new priest of Ambricourt, who is taking up his new parish, and who has little human experience on which to rely, in establishing relations with a deeply rooted, elderly faith community. (His only guidance is provided by a seasoned priest from a nearby village, who encourages patience, and a better quality of wine.) The formula only goes so far, as the priest is subjected, one after another, to a sequence of Christlike indignities: the students in his catechism class regularly mock him; the local count contravenes his efforts to establish a youth club; efforts to help the count's daughter, who is on the verge of suicide, are thwarted; an anonymous note is left for him, warning him 'to get out of the parish.'

Climax. The climax of the film, and arguably the crisis from which the priest, who has been tortured by stomach pains since assuming his position, will never recover, comes when he attempts to help the local countess to find her way back to God. Her problem is both her husband, whom she has given up on, and her young son, whose early death had turned her away from belief. She had decided she would rather live in Hell with her son than in heaven without him. The priest eventually convinces her that she is simply taking vengeance on God, in her thought, and is damning her soul. The priest rises to the occasion of providing insight to this tortured and isolated woman. But the effort demanded of him is overwhelming.

Decline. From this point on it is pretty much decline for the beset and pallid priest, whose own wretched condition is pulling him down, and will before long lead to his death, as beset as his savior by the heaviness of his daily load. (He has been reduced to consuming only bread and wine—to which he is

addicted-- and which barely sustains him.) He is finally freed by a decision, to look for medical health, and on this quest he sallies out from his parish one morning, walking down the road with his suitcase, heading for the rain station in the nearby city. Although he is never to reacquire health, or the easy relation to God that had brought him to his parish, he is about to smile, for the first time in the film. That smile occurs, as he assumes his position on the back of the motorcycle, feels the wind blowing in his hair, and pulses for a moment with the joy and fulness of life.

THEMES

Isolation. Although the priest has many duties in his new parish, he has no friends or allies, except, on occasion, the nearby village priest, a robust and seasoned member of his community, and a voice of sanity and adjustment for the 'country priest' of our film.

Illness The priest is at best frail and thin, and as time passes, in the joyless round of his duties, he gives in to serious stomach pains, restricts his own diet to bread and wine—in which he overindulges—and eventually dies, at least in part of malnutrition and depression.

Theology The priest's one triumph, in dealing with parish matters, appears to be the thoughtful counsel he provides the countess, who cannot conceal her hatred of God for having taken her young son away.

Joy. There is little joy in his film, or in the country priest depicted here. It as though we are forever waiting for the young man's narrow lips to crack into a slight smile, although they only do so once, when the priest sits on the motorcycle and feels the wind of life in his hair.

CHARACTERS

The country priest is on his first parish assignment. He is lonely, not adept at dealing with a narrow, deeply rooted old community, and with little support, from a community bent on keeping him away from them. He works hard at his job, scores one significant victory, over the countess' vengeance toward God, but eventually succumbs to bad health, unhappiness, and lack of support.

The priest from the neighboring village, who has good advice and good spirits to offer our country priest, reminds us of the life-skills required to survive in an isolated and demanding community.

The countess, who has lost her young son, scorns her husband, and wants revenge against God, is the most significant challenge faced by our young parish priest. The fact that he can convince her of God's care, is evidence of his commitment to his role.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

COUNTRY PRIEST

Character The young priest, on whose sufferings the film turns, is careful and thoughtful, in his new assignment as parish priest. However, he is not well, is frail and suffers from serious stomach problems, and is in the end not able survive the demanding and unfriendly human atmosphere in which he finds himself.

Parallels. In fiction one thinks of Faulkner's Cash Bundren, in *As I Lay Dying*. Cash will allow even his leg to fester, if it will aid in getting the central body buried. Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, wrap itself up around the self-sacrifice of Sydney Carton; Melville's *Billy Budds* sacrifices himself, in a way, for the whole world, like Jesus Christ.

Illustrative Moments

Isolated. From the start of the film we are made aware of the loneliness of the priest in his parish house. We see him standing by the tall iron gate of his new home, as he looks out into the empty street of the farm village, and across the road to the equally gated off mansion of the Count and Countess.

Encouraged. It is a true occasion when the neighboring priest sits down to chat, in the refectory dining room, and gives our young priest advice about survival in a country parish. We see them together chatting.

Mocked. The priest's catechism students play nice in class, politely answering all the required questions about the nature of the world, but outside of class they mock the priest, laughing behind his back.

Consoled. After the priest has left his rectory, to go into the city, he meets an old friend, who has been in seminar with him, then left the priesthood. Our priest feels it incumbent on him, in the present performance, to speak with his old buddy from a priestly standpoint. Doing this is consoling for him.

Discussion questions

Robert Bresson was a non-believer. But he was apparently, in the present film, working to consider one of the recourses available to mankind, to carry him through the difficult passages life is. The case study here is the Catholic Church. What verdict does Bresson come up with here, in his evaluation of the Catholic Church as a recourse?