Standing against the Storm: The Conflicted Protagonists of François Mauriac’s
Un Adolescent d’autrefois and Le Sagouin

by Robert Stanley

François Mauriac (1885-1970) is a superbly good proponent of what is commonly called the French Catholic novel. He is keenly aware of the need that humans have for love and for divine grace. Although his novels could never be called didactic, they nevertheless show the wretchedness of humankind where divine grace is absent. Very frequently the protagonist of a Mauriac novel is an individual who somehow feels himself or herself to be an outsider, that is, outside the norms of local society.

Two such examples are Alain Gajac, the protagonist of Un adolescent d’autrefois (1969), and Guillou de Cernès, the protagonist of Le Sagouin (1951). Both young men are beset with problems both social and psychological. Both feel themselves to be in a suffocating, oppressive situation. Alain Gajac is striving to show psychological independence from a domineering mother and to befriend a young man from a peasant background who has priestly aspirations. Guillou de Cernès, several years younger than Alain Gajac, is in an impossible situation between a shrewish mother and a pathetically weak father. Though a brief contact with the local instituteur gives Guillou reason for hope, the teacher decides against taking him on as a tuteur. The blow is too much for the youngster who commits suicide.

I would like to show in my study how skillfully Mauriac delineates the psychological forces that come to bear on these two young men. Mauriac evinces a real sympathy for suffering humanity, including his two characters here. Though Alain Gajac is fairly resilient, Guillou de Cernès is the innocent child whom the world crushes. Yet even in a tragic death, there can be some meaning and hope. I hope to show how Mauriac resolves the tension that he has so adroitly brought into being.

It has been said, and quite accurately, that Mauriac deals almost exclusively with the bourgeoisie and the nobility of the area in and around his native city of Bordeaux. The need to acquire and preserve land, particularly in the countryside of vineyards and pine forests, is a recurrent theme in Mauriac’s œuvre. Mauriac knows this area well and, the informed reader feels, he shares the attitudes of many of those whom he describes in his novels.

Very frequently the protagonist of Mauriac’s novels is an individual who somehow feels himself or herself as an outsider, that is, outside the norms of local society. One thinks of Thérèse in Thérèse Desqueyroux, a brilliant woman who attempts to kill her husband; of Jean Pélouyre in Le Baiser au lépreux, whose attempt to have normal marriage is a humiliating failure; of Gabriel Gradère, the wretched protagonist of Les Anges noirs, who in spite of an utterly sordid life is led to salvation; of Raymond Courrèges in Le Désert.
de l'amour, whose hopeless love for a woman whom his father loved platonically has indelibly marked his life.

In this study, I would like to deal with two such isolated protagonists: Alain Gajac of Un Adolescent d’autrefois (1969) and Guillou de Cernès in Le Sagouin (1951).

Of the two protagonists, Alain Gajac is older and more sophisticated than Guillou de Cernès. Alain is the son of a widowed mother, has one brother, the passionate hunter Laurent, and has a friendly though somewhat tense relationship with Simon Duberc, a young man of a peasant family whom the freethinking mayor is trying to dissuade from becoming a priest. Needless to say, there is much of importance at this point. Religion, particularly Catholicism as practiced in Southern France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is a major theme of this and other novels of Mauriac.

One of the main tasks to which Alain Gajac sets himself is to persuade his friend Simon to stay on in his seminary and to pursue his plan to become a priest. But Dupont, the local mayor, “notorious” as a freethinker and Free Mason, wants to lure Simon away from the seminary and to encourage him in a career of politics. Mauriac writes:

… les visites de Simon en soutane chez les Dupont furent acceptées même par le maire. Maman et le Doyen [the local priest] s’en réjouirent comme d’une victoire, ou du moins ils feignirent de s’en réjouir. M. Dupont voyait-il déjà Simon en secret ? Avait-il, dès cette année-là, entrepris de l’enlever à l’Église (Mauriac, Œuvres 4:683) ?

As this passage makes very clear, the political struggle between the left on the one hand and the Catholic Church on the other hand is one of the primary themes of this novel.

In Un Adolescent d’autrefois, as in numerous other novels of Mauriac, much time, attention, effort, and sometimes scheming are given over to the love of the land and particularly its acquisition and possession. Since the majority of Mauriac’s novels are set in les Landes, that area of vast pine forests and fruitful vineyards near the city of Bordeaux, the land in question is valuable for purposes of timbering and viticulture. Alain Gajac, for his part, is keenly aware of the contradiction, in religious terms, of living the Christian life and having, at the same time, this inordinate love of owning and acquiring land. In speaking to Marie, a girl friend, Alain has this to say in reference to his mother:

… Le mal pour maman tient dans cette convoitise que précisément elle ne ressent pas et qu’elle appelle concupiscence, qui correspond chez elle à une répulsion. Elle ne conçoit pas que le péché puisse être lié à cet orgueil de posséder et de régner. A-t-elle jamais lu, enfin je veux dire médité, certaines paroles du Seigneur qui, moi, me font trembler ? … Non, ce n’est pas vrai: je ne tremble pas plus qu’elle (Mauriac, Œuvres 4:723).

This contradiction noted by Mauriac in Alain and in his mother is certainly to be found in many other characters in Mauriac’s novels. Obviously, it was a trait that Mauriac doubtless noted among members of his own family and among other residents of les Landes. But Mauriac is certainly not unaware of the intrinsic contradiction of excessive love of possessions and the practice of the Christian life. In this particular novel, the author frequently calls the reader’s attention to the fact that Alain Gajac’s mother is
conspicuously Christian. At one point just prior to the quotation cited above, the novelist refers, somewhat sarcastically, to “… cette idolâtrie de la terre scandaleuse chez une chrétienne aussi affichée qu’elle était” (4:723). In other words, this inordinate love of physical possessions, in this case, the land, does not seem appropriate for some one who purports to be a serious Christian. How right the novelist is to refer to Our Lord’s words about the problems posed by wealth and material possessions. Mauriac seems to imply that for Alain’s mother—and indeed for Alain himself—sin consists primarily in sexual misconduct and not in glorying in one’s own possessions. Of course, a more balanced approach would be to include both excessive pride (e.g., possessions) and sexual impropriety in the area of what constitutes sin.

On another occasion, Alain Gajac prays because he is unhappy with his girlfriend, imagining all sorts of problems. But he realizes that his prayer is essentially for comfort and consolation. Mauriac writes, in reference to Alain:

… je me mis à genoux contre mon lit et j’ai encore pleuré, mais cette fois le front sur une épaule invisible. Toute ma religion ne tenait qu’à ce geste d’enfant malheureux qui pour tant d’autres était à la fois une absurdité qu’il allait se faire un grand calme, et que, vivrais-je un siècle, et même si tous les philosophes et tous les savants reniaient le Christ, et même s’il ne restait plus personne avec lui, moi j’y serais encore ; non pour servir les autres, comme les vrais chrétiens, non parce que j’aime les autres comme moi-même—mais seulement parce que j’ai besoin de cette bouée pour flotter, pour me maintenir à la surface de ce monde atroce---pour ne pas couler (Mauriac, Œuvres 4:731).

This is a self-administered critique on the part of Alain, designed, of course, by his literary creator. Alain reproaches himself for being very quick to look for consolation in religion rather than seeking from God the strength and the will to help others and to love others as he loves himself. He allows himself to imagine that, even if all other believers were to renounce and deny Christ, he would remain faithful to Christ. This attitude could be called self-serving fantasy. To what extent, one could ask, does this self-administered critique on the part of Alain apply to Mauriac himself? One probably cannot know for sure, but it is possible that Mauriac has such criticisms of his own religious faith. No serious Christian can help but question whether he or she is doing all that he or she should or can do to lead a fully devout life. Of course, excessive introspection can be as unhelpful as total indifference. Although Mauriac is a writer who takes his Christianity seriously, he is not at all adverse to questioning an individual’s modus operandi—either of himself or one of his literary characters.

As part of their plan to “liberate” Alain Gajac from the tyranny of his mother, Alain, Marie and Simon Duberc decide that, in the absence of Madame Gajac from Maltaverne, they will go there for a few days. The first night that they are there, Alain and Marie spend the greater part of one night together in bed. Without describing the scene in detail, Mauriac comments on the moral and religious implication of this night. On the second page of Chapter VIII, he writes:

Je ne voudrais rien écrire ici, concernant cette soirée et cette nuit, qui ressemblât à une de ces narrations dont André Donzac au collège était jaloux. Pourtant il faut que ce témoin de ma vie sache que ce fut l’instant qui l’éclaire, cette vie, qui lui donne sa signification parce que ce fut une nuit de péché et pourtant une nuit de grâce (Mauriac, Œuvres 4:755).
The juxtaposition of “une nuit de péché et pourtant une nuit de grâce” is typical of Mauriac’s Jansenist tendencies. The sexual maturation of the son from the maternal dominance is essential to psychological maturity and happiness, yet it is accompanied by an act that is, strictly speaking, a mortal sin, in Catholic doctrine. Mauriac, the overly scrupulous Jansenist, is keenly aware of this dichotomy.

Later, in the same chapter, Mauriac devotes another paragraph to a discussion of this “nuit d’amour.” This paragraph, too, has many theological nuances.

Ce fut, cette nuit-là, l’heure de nos vies où peut-être nous approchâmes le plus de la vérité pressentie par nous deux […], que l’amour humain est la préfiguration de celui qui nous a créés—mais que quelquefois, comme cette nuit pour nous deux, et si coupable qu’il fût, il ressemblait à cet amour que le créateur voue à sa créature, et la créature à son créateur, et que le bonheur dont nous débordions Marie et moi était comme un pardon donné d’avance (Mauriac, Œuvres 4: 756-757).

This paragraph is important as a real insight into the author’s view of human sexuality from a specifically Christian perspective. One has to read this paragraph carefully and carefully weigh what the author says. It is likely that relatively few Christians would disagree with his statement that “l’amour humain est la préfiguration de celui qui nous a créés.” But, according to traditional Christian values, human sexual expression should take place within the context of marriage. Somewhat more controversial would be Mauriac’s statement that “le bonheur dont nous débordions Marie et moi était comme un pardon donné d’avance.” This would be disputed perhaps by more conservative moral theologians. That God wants us to be happy is relatively uncontroversial. But when he writes that happiness from sexual activity is “like a pardon given in advance,” he is perhaps on shakier theological grounds. This is surely not to say that all sexuality is wrong but it is something of a stretch to say, as the author seems to say here, that the happiness or pleasure derived from sexual activity is enough to justify a pardon, if indeed a pardon is necessary.

There are, in Un Adolescent d’autrefois, numerous conversations, some quite serious, almost desperate, between Alain Gajac and his friend, Simon Duberc, the young man who, under the mayor’s influence, had left the seminary to become an instituteur. Simon is confused about his role in life: he has left the seminary but his work as instituteur leaves him ill at ease and dissatisfied. He feels himself socially inferior to Alain but still retains his loyalty to him, despite certain resentments. When Alain says that he (Alain) will be a lonely old man—much like le Vieux de Lassus—Simon says:

Et moi, monsieur Alain, qu’est-ce que je serai en 1970 ? ou plutôt qu’est-ce que j’aurai été, parce qu’il ne restera plus de moi, en ces années-là que quelques ossements. Moi, je n’aurai rien été. …

Vous, Simon, nous savons maintenant que vous vous retrouvez à votre point de départ. Ce royaume [de Dieu] que vous aviez cru abandonner, vous l’aviez au-dedans de vous, et partout où vous êtes, il est aussi (Mauriac, Œuvres 4: 767).

Holy Scripture says, in the New Testament, that the Kingdom of God is within us. This is comforting and reassuring for Christians, even for those whose faith and conduct are
not necessarily exemplary. It is to comfort and reassure Simon that Alain says what he says. But Simon is not reassured, at least immediately. His reply:

--Jamais ! protesta-t-il avec cette sourde violence que son accent rendait grotesque. Eh bé, si vous croyez que j'irai les supplier de me reprendre (Mauriac, Œuvres 4:767)!

Simon is referring to the authorities at the seminary that he chose to leave. But the reader must remember that Simon has left the seminary but has not, for all that, abandoned his religious faith.

In the next chapter there is also reference to “le royaume de Dieu.” Alain Gajac is reflecting on his experience with going to bed with Marie, announcing to his mother his intention to wed Marie, and trying to find a way out of his dilemma. Mauriac writes in reference to Alain:

Peut-être n’aurais-je jamais su ce que je sais et qui est si incroyable que je n’en parle à personne parce qu’on me traiterait de présomptueux, ou d’idiot, ou de fou; c’est que la parole : « Le royaume de Dieu est au-dedans de vous » est vraie à la lettre, qu’il n’y a qu’à descendre au-dedans de nous pour y pénétrer (4: 771)

Here again we see Mauriac’s deep religious faith. To a certain extent, Mauriac has put a certain amount of his own psyche into the character of Alain. Like Alain, Mauriac was raised by a very pious, perhaps overly scrupulous mother. Like Alain, he had to break out from the maternal bondage. Like Alain, he wanted to preserve his religious faith, while at the same time seeking psychological maturity. Every serious Christian needs to seek the Kingdom of God—and he or she needs to acknowledge, as Christ said, that the Kingdom of God is within us as well as outside us.

Wallace Fowlie, in an introduction he wrote for A Mauriac Reader, five novels translated into English by Gerard Hopkins, makes some pertinent comments about Mauriac’s literary antecedents. He writes:

Mauriac is a descendent, not from the novelists of the nineteenth century, from Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, but from Pascal and Racine and Baudelaire, writers whose sense of human tragedy is closely allied with a religious interpretation of man’s fate (A Mauriac Reader, p. xviii).

This comment is very much on target. Although Mauriac, as a man widely read in the great works of French literature, would have been familiar with the masterpieces of Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola and has a great ability to describe things and human beings persuasively and analytically, nevertheless his spiritual antecedents are definitely those of Pascal, Racine, and Baudelaire, for all of whom religious and theological considerations are of paramount importance. For Pascal and Racine, both of whom were fervent Catholics, and for Baudelaire, a lapsed Catholic, one assumes, though a poet for whom spiritual values are important, Mauriac has a deep empathy and a keen interest. In other words, Mauriac is definitely in the tradition of Catholic spirituality.

In Le Sagouin, Mauriac presents us with an altogether different situation. This time the protagonist is an awkward child, the son of a shrewish, genuinely unkind mother and
a weak father who seems only too willing to yield to his quite unpleasant wife. Apparently Mauriac began his novel in 1941, put it aside, and completed it in 1951. From what would have been originally a novel of typical length, Mauriac eventually fashioned a short novel or a long short story. Jacques Petit writes:

On voit déjà, à lire les premières pages de la première version, comment se sont atténuées pour prendre un tout autre sens les considérations psychologiques qui justifiaient le mariage de Paule, les disputes familiales et les relations des personnages. Le roman que voulait écrire Mauriac aurait sans doute été ordonné autour de l'innocente victime d'un mariage malheureux, dont il n'est pas certain toutefois que le malheur eût été aussi éclatant (Mauriac, Œuvres IV : 1211).

In other words, in the earliest version, there would not have been the “malheur … éclatant” that one sees in the later version of the novel. Unhappy marriages, of which there are numerous examples in Mauriac’s works, often produce unhappy results, e.g., in Thérèse Desqueyroux, Le Baiser au lépreux, Les Anges noirs, to name only three. As Jacques Petit goes on to write:

À relire l’ébauche de 1941, le roman ne lui "parut pas meilleur", dit-il, mais un changement de perspective le modifie aussitôt : "le personnage du petit garçon, qui, dans ce premier jet, n’était qu’un comparse, me saisit tout à coup. Instantanément, les circonstances et les raisons de sa mort me furent données". Ne restaient à écrire, de ce qui aurait pu, avec les drames, les disputes et les rêves, être un long roman, que quelques pages d’affolement de peur et de mort (Mauriac, Œuvres IV : 1121).

It is interesting that Guillou, originally thought of as a minor character, was perceived by Mauriac as the main character of the whole story. The title itself, Le Sagouin, is a somewhat pejorative word that means essentially “the loser, the misfit.”

In Le Sagouin, Mauriac is careful to show what suffering is inflicted upon young Guillou de Cernès, first by his cruel, uncaring mother Paule, secondly, and as if by default, by his father who is too weak to stand up to his shrewish wife. The enmity that exists between Paule and her husband, as well as that between Paule and her mother-in-law, makes life in the house difficult for all everyone, especially for Guillou. A portion of a conversation between Paule and Madame la baronne makes this clear.

--La nuit porte conseil, dormez bien, ma fille. Et veuillez oublier ce que j’ai pu vous dire de blessant, comme je vous pardonne moi-même …
La bru haussa les épaules :

Obviously there is no love lost between these two women who are forced to live together under the same roof.

One of the problems facing Paule de Cernès is that her only son, the aforementioned Guillou, has been sent home from two separate boarding schools. Something has to be done for his education, though Paule really believes that her son is mentally inferior. She comes to the idea of asking the local instituteur, Robert Bordas, to tutor her son. Though her mother-in-law has asked him and failed to get him to take on
Guillou as a tutoree, Paule has more luck. She takes her reluctant son to the home of the instituteur one day after the schoolboys have left the school to go home. In spite of her gloomy assessment of Guillou, the youngster is almost immediately put at ease by Robert Bordas and actually enjoys his first session. Guillou is favorably impressed by the atmosphere and by the books to be found at his tutor’s home. Mauriac writes:

> Et pourtant Guillou avait pénétré dans un monde étrange et délicieux. Était-ce l’odeur de la pipe qui, même éteinte, ne quittait guère la bouche de M. Bordas ? Mais surtout, il y avait partout des livres, des piles de journaux sur le buffet et sur un guéridon à portée de main du maître d’école. Les jambes allongées, sans prêter aucune attention à Guillou, il coupait les pages d’une revue à couverture blanche dont le titre était rouge (Mauriac, Oeuvres IV: 357-358).

It is obvious that Robert Bordas knows how to deal well with young people. It is Bordas’ wife who suggests that Guillou help them to shell some green beans. After that, Bordas has his young charge read to him aloud from a book chosen by Guillou. It is surprising to Bordas how well and even enthusiastically Guillou reads aloud—and this from a boy whose own mother described him as being retarded. From the novel one reads:

> L’instituteur recula un peu sa chaise. Il aurait pu, il aurait dû s’émerveiller d’entendre cette voix fervente de l’enfant qui passait pour idiot. Il aurait pu, il aurait dû se réjouir de la tache qui lui était assignée, du pouvoir qu’il détenait pour sauver ce petit être frémissant. Mais il n’entendait l’enfant qu’à travers son propre tumulte. Il était un homme dans sa quarantième année, plein de désirs et d’idées, et il ne sortirait jamais de cette école au bord d’une route déserte (Mauriac, Oeuvres IV: 361).

Much of importance lies lodged within this quotation. Bordas is indeed aware of the fact that young Guillou is not mentally retarded. He “could have, should have been amazed” at the enthusiasm with which Guillou reads aloud from a book. But Bordas is distracted by the fact that he will never be able to leave his rural elementary school. He would love to live the life of the mind and he does supervise the book review section of a journal. But his chances of moving on to a better job are small. This is why he plays less attention to Guillou than would normally be the case.

After Guillou learns that Robert Bordas does not want to work with him, he (Guillou) feels a terrible rejection since he was so taken with the possibilities of working with the instituteur. He is so taken aback, in fact, that he decides to take his own life by jumping into a river near the mill. Guillou and his father are in the cemetery where Galéas often clears away the weeds. When Galéas notices that his son is no longer in the cemetery, he follows him toward the river. Mauriac writes:

> Galéas ne regarde pas en face l’issue vers laquelle se hâtent les deux derniers Cernès. Des aulnes frémissants annoncent que la rivière est proche. Ce n’est plus le roi des aulnes qui poursuit le fils dans une dernière chevauchée, mais l’enfant lui-même qui entraîne son père dérouenné et insulté vers l’eau endormie de l’enceinte où l’été les garçons se baignent nus. Voici qu’ils sont près d’atteindre les humides bords du royaume où la mère ne les harcèlera plus. Ils vont être délivrés de la Gorgone, ils vont dormir (Mauriac, Oeuvres IV: 371).

This is a heart-wrenching description of the deaths of father and son in the cold water of the river. Mauriac implies in no uncertain terms that both Galéas and his son Guillou seek eternal refuge from the cruel and ever unsatisfied Paule, who is psychologically
unable to give either her husband or her son any respite throughout the novel. The reference to “une grande chevauchée” is a reference to the famous poem “Der Erlikönig” by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In the poem by Goethe, the father on horseback carries in his arms his dying son. In the story by Mauriac, it is the son, determined to die, who leads his father, albeit without evil intention, to a death by drowning. Mauriac has presented this way out as the only viable solution to two males, father and son, who are desperate for a resolution to their crisis.

Mauriac shows the calculations that human beings put themselves through, even after something so profoundly tragic as this multiple death by drowning. The old baroness, mother of Galéas and grandmother of Guilou, is happy that, because of these two deaths, the property will pass to the children of her daughter. In addition, Paule would disappear from her mother-in-law’s life. As for Paule’s life, she would go back to live with her uncle and his wife. Mauriac, however, is not going to let Paule escape so easily. We the readers learn that Paule is suffering from terminal cancer. Here is what Mauriac lets us know about Paule’s end. She wonders what the facts are concerning these two deaths by drowning.

Paule ne savait pas, elle ne le saurait jamais. Elle était contente que sa mort à elle fût si proche. Elle répétait à l’infirmière que la morphine lui faisait mal, que son foie ne supporterait aucune piqûre, elle voulait boire ce calice, jusqu’à la dernière goutte—non certes qu’elle crût qu’il existe, ce monde invisible où nos victimes nous ont précédés, où nous pourrons tomber aux genoux des êtres qui nous avaient été confiés et qui, par notre faute, se sont perdus. Elle n’imaginait pas qu’elle pût être jugée. … Elle s’absolvait d’avoir eu horreur d’un fils, réplique vivante d’un horrible père. Elle avait vomi les Cernès, parce qu’on n’est pas maître de sa nausée (Mauriac, Oeuvres IV:372).

This is a terrible way for Paule to be finishing her life. There is a certain amount of religious imagery here: “elle voulait boire ce calice jusqu’à la dernière goutte.” The reader also learns that Paule could not imagine that she would face any sort of final or divine judgment. When the author writes: “Elle s’absolvait d’avoir eu horreur d’un fils, réplique d’un horrible père,” we are reminded of the absolution that a priest gives to a penitent after the latter has made a good confession. But this is not the absolution that follows a confession; rather it is absolution, so to speak, that Paule bestows on herself. This makes it a cruel parody of the real thing.

In a collection of essays by various scholars about Mauriac, Jean Lacouture, in a chapter entitled “Un Girondin dans le siècle,” has this to say about Le Sagouin:

Mais c’est pourtant en 1951 qu’il publie un court et déchirant récit qui est peut-être son chef-d’œuvre de conteur et pour lequel beaucoup d’entre nous donneraient presque tous ses grands romans : le Sagouin, admirable synthèse de ce qui est le plus irremplaçable en lui, la sensibilité, le goût des êtres, la vigilante lucidité, la maîtrise absolue du récit, le chant des phrases, la concision enfin (Mauriac, 22).

What can one say then in conclusion about these two novels and, specifically, about the two chief protagonists? Alain Gajac struggles to assert his own personality and to break free from his mother’s domination. In this he is moderately successful, although his brief affair with Marie is not of long duration. Mauriac gives us the impression that he will be less religious, at least in a conventional sense, than he has been up to this point. At
least Alain has a chance to lead a reasonably happy and fulfilling life. In the case of young Guillou de Cernès, on the other hand, happiness, at least in this life, is not to be realized. Because of his grief over not being able to work with the instituteur of the village and because of his deeply unhappy and unnatural mother, the unfortunate youngster apparently feels that suicide is the only solution open to him. What surprises—and perhaps even shocks us as readers—is the fact that his father joins him in suicide.

Mauriac presents us his young protagonist in such a way that we have real sympathy for him and his plight. Although death is the end of Guillou’s earthly life, Mauriac would believe that the physical death of the body is not the end, though he does not state that in the novel itself. We mourn for Guillou, as readers, but we are nevertheless fascinated by his story and are left with sadness at his unfulfilled potential. It is said that *Le Sagouin* is or has often been read in French lycées. There is no doubt that this novel is one that arouses considerable compassion on the part of its readers.

Mauriac definitely understands human psychology well, including that of adolescents. He has sympathy for the oppressed, those whom society rejects or marginalizes, in short, those who are *mal aimés* in any sense of the term. David O’Connell accurately summarizes the skill with which Mauriac has brought together numerous elements to build a cohesive whole.

*Le Sagouin* is one of Mauriac’s most powerful novels. It is no wonder that it is read widely by French secondary-school students, for it captures the essence of childhood (with its fears and insecurities), and of family life (with its conflicting allegiances), while using this microcosm of small-town life to reflect the larger picture of French history, social friction, and class antipathy (O’Connell 130-1).

If Mauriac is often associated with the major themes of the French Catholic novel (love, hate, despair, hope, and the great drama of salvation), he is also justly renowned for his psychological insights into all kinds of people, including, but not limited to, adolescents. That Guillou and his father Galéas suffer is undeniable, but the fact that we as readers actually care about them and their suffering is a tribute to Mauriac’s skills as a writer of psychological perception.

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**Works Cited**


