



[Thérèse Desqueyroux](#) , [Cornerhouse](#)

Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) June 2013

The late **Claude Miller**'s final film is intensely claustrophobic, unventilated and suffocating, leaving one gasping in the darkness for a small shot of air. It is also an exquisite and accomplished adaptation of **Francois Mauriac**'s classic 1927 novel, strikingly framed and idyllically located in French period heaven which is a little at odds with the tale itself, as oppressive as a totalitarian state.

It hasn't received the same publicity as that other recent adaptation – [The Great Gatsby](#) – which is a bit of a shame in my view, as it is a sumptuous and solemn film, a feast for the senses that provides an extraordinarily perceptive insight into an intense and miserable

marriage of convenience

and emulates its oppressiveness by perfect pace and timing. A nourishing visual feast, seductive sounds and an overwhelming quietness of a quality, you rarely find in modern life, that is at once both soothing and stimulating. It is indeed a work of art, and so

right at home

in the little gem that is Manchester's Cornerhouse.

The film is based on a work of great fiction with a literary style that makes modern day writing look positively prosaic. The viewer cannot wander through the corridors of the mind or heart of the miserable and unfulfilled **Thérèse (Audrey Tatou)** as the reader of the novel can, making her on-screen persona more difficult to empathise with than the character one meets on the written page - which is why you should read the

book

and watch the

film

. Therese's interior dialogue is important in getting to know her better, and it reflects a time and place where women kept their thoughts and feelings to themselves, hidden beneath a

façade of femininity

, a mask that Tatou wears with po-faced pout throughout.

Hopefully, the release of this film will send some viewers straight in the direction of Amazon, as the book is just as worthy of remembrance as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatz. It is a delight, full of eloquent prose, poetic and sensitive language, and in it you get to know **Thérèse** a little better, hear what she is thinking and experience how she is feeling which provides some explanation for her seemingly cold and callous behaviour.

It is an age-old story of a doomed marriage, in this case between a **suffocated woman** and a **boorish man**

, who live a materially rich but intellectually poor and banal existence together on the family estate in the south west of France. But, while stories of bad marriages abound, there are few as perceptive as this, thanks to the discerning eye of the prize-winning

Mauriac

, his accurate observation of

bourgeois society

and his extraordinary insight into the mind of a tied and tormented woman. All of which are evident in the power and quality of his poetic writing.



Audrey Tatou recently said that she does not want every millimetre of her body scrutinised by Hollywood, which is a shame for **admirers of the female form**, because she is rather cute, with skin like porcelain and enormous pools of dark, melted chocolate for eyes. Her looks may be good, but

her acting is impeccable

, and in this portrayal, she radiates the quality of a still life painting and manages to portray both the beauty and beast in the character of Therese equally well. One minute she is charming and as exquisitely mannered as a woman of her class is supposed to be. The next she is still, sullen and sour, and is as drab as a rainy day in a one-horse town.

She lives at odds with the **stifling conformity of bourgeois society** and marries for money, to unite two families who own adjoining tracts of pine forest, and “enters the cage like a sleepwalker” to live a life of “flat routine... solitude... suffering and despair” imprisoned by convention. She marries the wealthy landowner

Bernard Desqueyroux

(

Gilles Lellouche

), the brother of her best friend

Anne

(

Anais Demoustier

), and finds him a dull and dutiful duffer.

Bernard is not a monster, but he bores, irritates, and neglects her, being more interested in country pursuits. She feels suffocated by his silence and neglect, and longs for him to notice and understand her. His love of hunting, shooting and killing is at odds with her thirst for life and there are many visually eye-catching movie metaphors of their lack of togetherness. She describes him as “fitting the well-trodden country roads of his life... an old bachelor type” whereas she wants the “flesh and blood of life... the living human forest that fills the streets, the creatures torn by passions more violent than any storm”. In a doomed and drastic bid to escape her fate of a “**death in life**”, **she poisons him** with arsenic and is punished by the powerful family machinery, who crush and ostracise her to protect the family name and fortune.

My one criticism of this well directed, absorbing and thought provoking film is the neglect of any attempt to understand Therese, and she is depicted as being a bit too black and white, the archetypal cold-hearted woman. Whereas in the novel, Mauriac is more kindly towards her, depicting her with more **warmth and complexity** - a bit more fifty shades of gris, which is why I recommend you **read the book** as well as **watch the film**

. In its short and easy to read 104 pages, it is not hard not to become enraptured by the language, and if not fall in love with Therese, at least like her a little more than the woman you see on the big screen in Miller's adaptation.

She was oppressed, as women were and still are in some parts of the world, worn and wearied by it – “her real face they did not see”. She feared loneliness, was **stifled by convention**, silenced by family... “The silence was no deeper for the deaf woman sitting motionless with her hands folded in her lap than for the girl with the faintly hollowed cheeks”. She was no doubt depressed, the expectation of marriage failing to live up to the reality of it... “If only she could fix her mind freely upon the mysterious despair which seemed to have seized upon her”... “the night was far from cold but somehow it was impossible to imagine that a day would ever come when it would not be raining”. She longed to choose her friends “as her heart dictated, prompted not by the tie of blood, but by the movement of the mind, and the body too”. “She composed a symphony of happiness, invented a world of delights, built up from odds and ends a wholly impossible universe of love”. She wanted to “live dangerously, in the fullest sense of the word”, experience a “life of the mind” with people who are “

really alive

” and not ”

condemned to a life of deceit

”.

There is a bit more to the story, which I won't spoil for you and some hope at *The End*, when Therese is freed from the asphyxiation of her old life. Intoxicated by half a bottle of wine and of life in Paris, she heaves a sigh of relief and walks away, leaving the reader and/or the viewer with the hope of a happier future for her.

It is rare to get two great classics revived in the same year, but in my view, this polished production puts the decadent razzle-dazzle 3D-spectacle of Luhrmann's ***The Great Gatsby*** in the shade, although I suspect the viewing figures for Miller's final film will fall far short of those for Gatsby. It is shyer, but has more

authenticity, style and depth

than Jay G ever had. Where Gatz was the full on fake,

Therese is the genuine article

.

So, **go read, go see**, and before you settle in take a loooong deeeeeeep lungful of air, this is strangulating stuff.

Editor's Note: A lot of the themes of the destiny of women aired in the book and this new film are to be discussed at [Sex sells: promoting images of women](#) on Tuesday 18th June.