

## **Reflections on "Jean de Florette" and "Manon des Sources" by Stuart Fernie**

Below, you will find notes on themes and characters in the film "Jean de Florette" and its sequel "Manon des Sources". Some years ago I studied the films with pupils at Higher Level (in Scotland), and with a view to returning to them, I thought I might find notes on them on the Internet. To my great surprise I found very little about them, and so I thought I would write up my thoughts on these wonderful films to share with any other potential students. However, please bear in mind that these are only notes and several ideas are little more than touched upon.

As the films are painstakingly faithful to the books on which they are based, I hope the notes will be equally applicable to a study of Pagnol's originals.

This is an apparently simple tale of greed and prejudice among French peasants in the 1930s. However, the apparently simple premise of blocking a water source in order to force a landowner to sell his property soon leads to a complex series of moves and countermoves with life-changing consequences.

The tale also provides the basis for many observations of life and an interesting interpretation of the ways in which our lives are intertwined, making it a rich source for reflection on a variety of themes such as morality, devotion, family, town and country living, the importance and value of land, but perhaps above all else, fate or destiny and the way in which events can catch up with choices one makes in life.

These themes are of course interdependent, and it would be difficult to discuss one without reference to the others.

A good starting point might be to state the obvious, that land and its cultivation are the "first principles" of the story and are the reason or catalyst for all the subsequent events. It is essential to understand not just the potential monetary value of the land in dispute, but the principle that everything comes from it, and the land is eternal.

Next to the land, César (or Papet)'s great love is family. Unmarried and childless, family and the family name are everything to César. Ugolin is his fairly simple but hard-working nephew. Together (as a family unit) they form a formidable team with César hatching the plot to drive Jean Cadoret from his land, while Ugolin puts it into action.

César's plan is not, however, simply some "get rich quick" scheme, but rather a means to the end of ensuring the continuation and success of the Soubeyran family and name. César is a "principled schemer" – he is acting for (as he sees it) the best of reasons. If he were acting out of pure greed it would be easy to hate him, but as we can understand and even sympathise with his motives, we have decidedly ambivalent feelings toward him.

César's motives may be honourable, but in terms of the lengths to which he is prepared to go to achieve his objectives, he is morally reprehensible. At best he is quite amoral and self-centred as he inadvertently causes the death of the original owner of the land he covets, and indirectly brings about the death of Jean Cadoret who inherits the land. He is a determined, strong, and intelligent man who is driven by his obsession to preserve his family through the possession of rich and eternal land. While doing this, he tries to give value to his own life, which appears largely empty. He seems rather calculating, unfeeling, and unwilling to recognise the feelings and needs of others (though tempted on occasion, as when he feels sorry for Jean when he struggles to plant his crops), beyond those of his family, to which he is devoted.

Ugolin is not so determined, but is willing to go along with César's plan as it will clearly benefit him. He is more straightforwardly greedy, yet is more "human" and aware of the feelings and suffering of others. He sees things less clearly than César, or at least does not seem to grasp the implications of their plan, while César is aware, but turns a blind eye in the name of his family's future.

Jean is seen as equally determined, but is more open and tolerant than his country neighbours. This leads to what is often viewed as one of the film/book's main themes – town versus country living.

Jean is educated, appreciates beauty and culture, and sees the "bigger" picture. He tries to apply science and learning to farming, while his neighbours apply experience and tradition. Jean may represent man's determination to master nature through knowledge, while the country folk understand nature through living with it, and try to work with it.

Another trait of country life to come to the fore is that history (especially in the shape of arguments or disputes) means more and continues to play a part in the present. Events are not forgotten since the community in which they occur is relatively small. According to the films, country people tend to be less tolerant and compassionate than townfolk. There appears to be greater prejudice, greed and secrecy behind the veil of friendship as relatively minor events take on considerable importance within the confines of village life. It is interesting to note something of a role reversal in respect of the more traditional view of country folk as unspoiled, open, friendly, tolerant, and hard-working, while townspeople are generally viewed as seduced by greed and corruption as they are swallowed by the anonymity of city life. Role reversal is usually a device used to clarify things by changing a situation round so that what may have been acceptable is suddenly seen for what it really is.

In many ways this was an age of innocence relatively "undamaged" by communication and all that implies. That small community represented the world to its inhabitants, and any interference would be regarded as a potential threat, allowing Pagnol to discuss all the more clearly the themes of tolerance, morality, and progress (by means of comparing tradition to a more modern approach).

Clearly the farmers of the region use traditional farming methods based on experience, working knowledge, and even superstition. The village and the surrounding area are virtually their entire world as it is untouched by communication and age-old rivalries still apply, largely because of lack of experience and knowledge of other "cultures". This is probably an accurate depiction of life in rural France at the time, and it was indeed something of a struggle to get these communities to embrace more modern methods and ideas. Naturally there was suspicion of any stranger who showed up – particularly one who had no experience of farming but who was willing to apply science and learning to cultivation of the land, rather than age-old and proven techniques. The existing farmers would feel threatened and perhaps even more importantly, humiliated, by this new approach. Clearly they felt little in the way of loyalty or compassion for Jean as he appeared to have little regard for their more traditional methods, thereby creating something of a divide.

This division is not, of course, restricted to tradition v. modern approaches to agriculture. It can (and should) be broadened to incorporate other themes, including the social divide between villages, between country and town, and also the divide between education and an insular approach to life. Set at a time when there was little movement and when there was great pride in local traditions and history, this is also a story of intolerance – both of people and modern ideas.

In my opinion, "Jean de Florette" and "Manon des Sources" are less about the differences between town and country living than about the differences between, on the one hand, narrow-minded prejudice and selfishness, and on the other, tolerance, respect and consideration for others. By the end, Ugolin has committed suicide because he has fallen deeply in love with the adult Manon, Jean's daughter. She, of course, will have nothing to do with one of those responsible for the death of her father. Ugolin cannot live with the love he feels for Manon and the knowledge she hates him for what he did. He is thus led from his inward-looking existence, in which he was relatively happy and without pangs of conscience, to see and suffer the results of his own actions.

Similarly, but even more devastatingly, César must face the results of, and the pain caused by, his actions when he discovers that Jean was actually his own illegitimate son of whose existence he was entirely unaware. With blinding irony, and in the name of his family, he killed the one thing he had pined for and missed all his life – a son and heir. He dies filled with remorse in the knowledge that he is responsible for the death of his own son, whom he now sees as a human being who had aspirations, a family of his own, and a future of which he was deprived. Previously, Jean was merely a pawn in César's machinations, but discovering he was his son led to his (and our) appreciating the value of life – all life, whether related to us or not.

The country folk, however, had to share responsibility for Jean's death (at least to a certain degree) as they were all vaguely aware of César and Ugolin's activities and chose to mind their own business unless they became directly involved. Manon pushed them into recognising their responsibility by ensuring they were all involved in the payback, by blocking the water supply to the entire village.

The implication seems to be that we are all responsible for one another, whether through our actions or our inaction in the face of events of which we might disapprove.

One of the main themes, and one I find most interesting, is that of fate or destiny. It is strange that so often one suffers as a result of one's own actions. César and Ugolin suffered and lost everything as a result of their own selfish and destructive greed. The old adage, "Do unto others ..." etc., was never truer as Manon displays the same Soubeyran cunning and determination in blocking the water source to the village, though this time toward the end of seeking truth and justice.

It has been suggested that the characters were predestined to act as they did. This calls in to question the definition of destiny or fate. For some it means there is an inevitability, that we are bound to do certain things at certain times, but for others it suggests some sort of justice where people face a "comeuppance", or where events even themselves out to produce some kind of balance.

Of course the answer is not simple, and that is what makes it interesting.

As far as the first is concerned, I think the characters (and people in general) are predestined to do things only in the sense that we are all prisoners of our character and genes. We are predisposed toward certain behaviour and actions, but we still have a choice, and that choice becomes interesting when we come in to conflict with others. Do we persist in our action, or do we see things from the point of view of others? How far are we prepared to go in order to ensure the success of our ventures?

Papet and Ugolin tinker with fate. They establish obstacles, but do not act directly enough for them to feel real guilt. They do not intend to kill, but they push Jean in the right direction to fulfil their objective. Are they truly guilty? They certainly make a major contribution to the circumstances which led to Jean's death. Were they predestined to do so? They could have stopped at any time, if they had shown some thought and consideration for others, but to continue was their choice, so although they followed their natures, they did indeed have free will. However, they would have had to break with their natures to do so.

Interestingly, Jean shows the same determination to succeed, but he is not trying to influence others, while Papet and Ugolin are playing with the fates of others.

One of the major elements of the story is irony. I might go so far as to suggest that irony does not exist without the element of free will, and the question of the choices we make as far as their influence on others is concerned, is quite essential to the whole. Irony is used to accentuate that importance.

I think the old adage "what goes around comes around" is very apt to this story. Fate (by the second definition I mentioned above) ensures that Papet and Ugolin suffer as a result of their own actions, thus there is an "evening out" and a balance is produced.

The contrast between the two "sides" is considerable, with Jean the long-suffering idealist, and César and Ugolin the cunning, greedy, and selfish peasants after his land. If that were all there was to the story, it would have little appeal. What makes it wonderfully tragic is the fact that the "villains" of the piece are human and likeable. We share their aspirations and understand their motives, but it is the realisation that we could all fall into the same trap that makes this such a powerful story.

The key to "Jean de Florette"'s success as a film lies in emotion, sympathy, and simplicity. It is a deceptively simple tale and for that reason was likely to appeal to a broader and more adult base than many of the other films around at the time. It contains "realism" in that it's principally about people, their lives, and the implications of choices we make, and can therefore apply to anyone's life – as opposed to science fiction, wild adventure etc.. The story and the way it's told arouses feelings of indignation, anger, compassion, injustice etc., but all tempered with sympathy and understanding for the main "culprits", and that is the real genius of the piece – revealing a far more (morally) complex tale than it at first appears to be, and revealing far more existential implications about the impact of our actions on others.

By and large the "great" films are those which tap into the audience's emotions, and "Jean" certainly succeeded in that respect, while managing to say something about the human condition.

These films are extraordinarily gripping and touching with excellently drawn and multi-faceted characters and attention to detail. The performances simply don't come any better than this – the three leads are totally convincing and affecting. Depardieu gives Jean dynamism and dignity, while Montand and Auteuil are superb in making their villains contemptible yet human and likeable.

The direction by Claude Berri maintains pace, interest and sympathy – even, as I indicated above, for the "villains" of the piece, while the music brilliantly captures and enhances the mood and remains memorable long after the end of the films.