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“The Story of Adele H.” : Surnames and Siblings

Art Goldsher

Although *The Story of Adele H.* has been recognized-almost unanimously-as a visual and thematic masterpiece, most critical discussions and reviews of the film concentrate solely on Adele's obsession with love, on her monomaniacal pursuit of Lt. Pinson. This obsession does indeed provide the bulk of the film's thrust, but to consider the obsession the most important psychological concern of the film is a mistake. Certainly Adele carries her romantic notions to heroic extremes; if love is her religion, she is the most vestal of non-virgins; she is the perfect devotee. It is her religiously romantic heroism that endears her to almost all reviewers, but it is this same quality that accounts for any negative responses by viewers to Adele and to the film. If *The Story of Adele H.* is about only one woman's obsession with love, some dissatisfied viewers could rightly question whether the film has anything to say to them. Adele often appears ludicrous, her actions absurd: how does she serve as a model? How does she help viewers understand their social position? Viewing the film only as the story of a romantic obsession with love leads to mistaking Adele's heroics for examples of demeaning feminine submission; viewers might easily, along with Lt. Pinson, look at Adele's desperate actions and say, “you are ridiculous.” But to say this is to misunderstand Adele. On the psychological level, the film is far more important as a study of a talented, sensitive young woman's struggle with her position in her family and her attempt at making an impact on the world than it is a story of love gone awry. Even the most sensitive reviewers pass over the familial implications of the film by saying that it must have been very difficult to be Victor Hugo's daughter. I would like to suggest that Truffaut wants us to understand that Adele's obsession with Pinson, indeed her entire concern with love, is symptomatic of much deeper and far more universal problems.

The key to understanding Adele's almost enervating disorder is the final shot of the film which is a partial repetition of an earlier shot. In this final shot, Adele stands on a rocky shore in Guernsey, the Hugo's home while in exile from France, and the voiceover says: “That a young girl should walk over the sea,

from the Old into the New World, to join her lover--this I shall accomplish."¹ The viewer may wonder why this shot ranks so above others in the film that it is repeated. While it is a final commentary on the emptiness of Adele's accomplishment, to make the comment seems obvious and unnecessary. It is only when one places the shot in its original context earlier in the film that its rightful significance becomes apparent. Earlier, the voiceover was more lengthy: "This incredible thing--that a girl who today begs her father for her daily bread, would come into her own within four years--this, I shall accomplish. This incredible thing, that a young girl shall walk over the sea, from the Old into the New World, to join her lover--this, I shall accomplish" (152). The emphasis in this earlier shot is on accomplishment, not on love. Adele's major concern is that she has had to beg her father for her daily bread; she must do something to "come into her own." When she repeats, "This incredible thing . . . this, I shall accomplish," with the idea of following her lover in between, she has translated her psychological concern with becoming independent of familial bondage into a physical plan of action. Having first identified the underlying cause for her repression and her need for relief, she has found what she feels is a suitable manner in which to work out the problem and prove herself. Remembering the shot as it appeared in the middle of the film, one sees that Truffaut is emphasizing, at the film's end, that for various societal, familial, and personal reasons, Adele was not strong enough to come into her own. She must, as her Barbados protector Madame Baa writes, "return to her country and the warmth of her family," a warmth that has so thoroughly distorted her (183). With this discussion of the final scene as introduction to Adele's primary obsession, it is illuminating to demonstrate further the importance of familial concerns and of Adele's desire for recognition in the film. Truffaut has beautifully and subtly interwoven the familial disorders with the romantic conventions that are so often discussed by critics.

Adele's difficulty in dealing with the renown of her surname is particularly clear during the scene in which she asks a hypnotist if he can force Pinson into loving her. This is the first time that Adele, who has used the pseudonym "Miss Lewly" throughout the film, deliberately reveals that her father is Victor Hugo. The hypnotist tells her that fulfilling her request is merely a matter of money, and Adele says she can get the money from her father. Significantly, when asked who her father is, Adele will not speak his name; she hesitates and then slowly spells out his name on a dusty mirror, erasing it as soon as the hypnotist has understood its import. In the scene after she finds out that the hypnotist is a fraud, Adele's anxiety about being Hugo's daughter is verbalized.

While she has previously shown her anger at being associated with Hugo by the bookseller who gives her bound volumes of her father's books, her anger gives way to extreme disorder in this scene as a distraught Adele, visibly haggard for the first time in the film, writes in her diary: "I denounce the official records as a fraud of identity. Father unknown. I was born of an unknown then, I don't know my father" (141). Clearly, Adele is under the spell of her obsession with familial ties; and, significantly, her lament has no reference to Pinson.

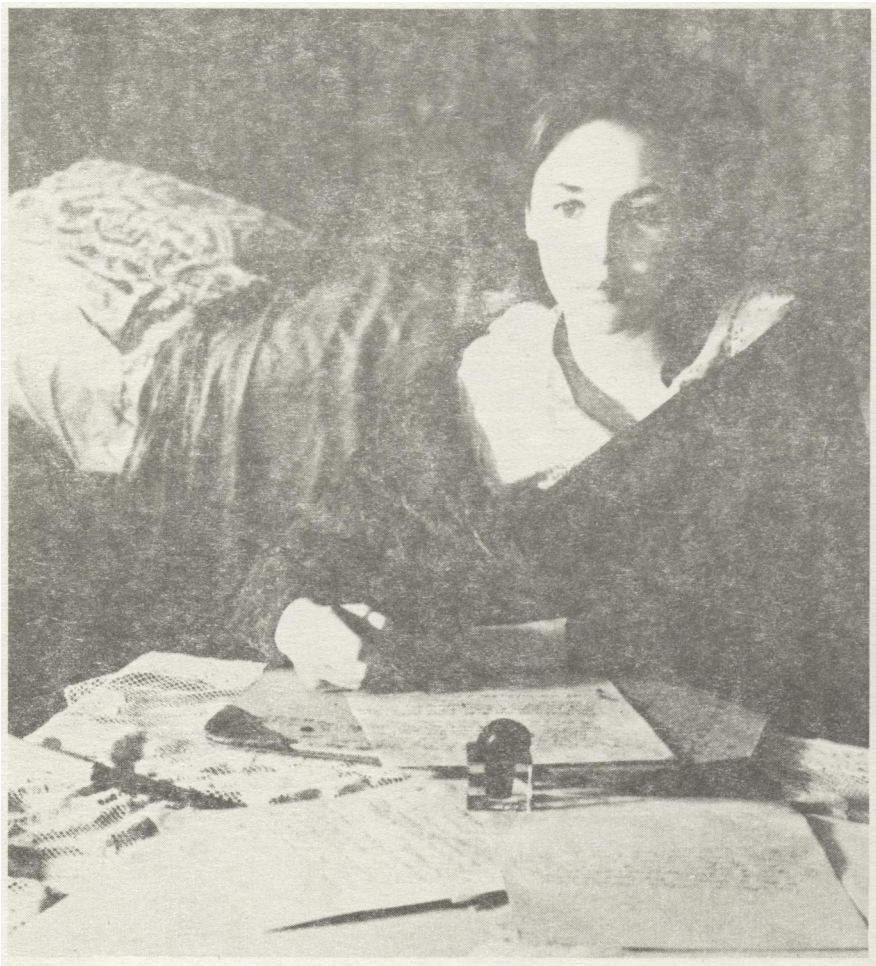
Indeed, none of her half-conscious lamentations, her ravings on her dreams, refer to Pinson at all. Immediately after the scene discussed above,

Adele raves for the first time. Her anguish is excruciating as she speaks, not of her love for Pinson, but for her obsession with her position in her family, with her feeling of inferiority to her sister Leopoldine: "The two newlyweds buried together. Even death cannot part them . . . The dead bride's dress is displayed in her parents' home . . . *But it's my home too!* The bride's gown is displayed like a relic to all visitors. *But what about me? What can I do?* My eyes are burning . . . They hurt so much! I don't want to look at them . . . I don't want to see that trunk under the bed. *Get rid of my sister's clothes!* Burn them . . . give them away. I can't stand the sight of them! My eyes can't stand them" (141, my italics). Critics have pointed out Adele's adherence to what she feels is the romantic ideal represented in the death of Leopoldine and her husband. Adele feels that the husband, when he knew Leopoldine was drowning and that he could not save her, chose to die with her rather than live without her. One wonders, however, if Adele could have distorted the story of her sister's death as we wonder how justifiably motivated any of her feelings are. And while we can assume that Adele's romanticized perception of the drowning may have triggered, in part, her own longing for romantic completion, Adele's attitude toward Leopoldine, her death, and her parents' reaction to the death, is too tinged with bitterness to be merely food for emulation. While Adele begins raving about the romantic, "Even death cannot part them," she becomes frantic when she mutters, "But it's my home too" or "What can I do? My eyes are burning...Get rid of my sister's clothes." Adele is surely more interested in asserting her place in her family than she is in emulating a romantic tragedy; yet, the two ideas, sibling frustration and romantic fulfillment, are entwined. The misguided drive for romantic fulfillment is an acceptable way to deal with her family for making her feel inferior or less loved than Leopoldine—at least a more acceptable way than open bitterness.

Yet, Adele's lucid moments are not without tinges of her bitterness and inner torment. Earlier, she has shown her landlady, Mrs. Saunders, a family album that contains a sketch of Leopoldine. She tells Mrs. Saunders how Leopoldine died and mentions that her father, at the time on a journey, "learned the news by chance . . . from a newspaper, he nearly went mad with grief" (51). When asked how *she* felt about the death, Adele answers, "Leopoldine was everyone's favorite." This is an innocent enough remark except that it evades the question and emphasize's Adele's insecurities. Seconds later, Adele is more obviously bitter when Mrs. Saunders understandingly says she had always wanted brothers and sisters, and Adele retorts: "No you don't understand me. You don't know how lucky you are to be an only child!" (51).

The height of Adele's obsession with Leopoldine is, of course, her recurring nightmare about trying to prevent herself from drowning. The dream is open to a number of interpretations, but underlying them all is the idea that, however pure or unpure Adele's motives for following Pinson are, her obsession is destructive—and she knows this somewhere within herself. She cannot live up to any ideal. First, there is no one to choose to die with her. Second, the lonely and desperate dream is a hint to the viewer—and should be to Adele—that there is something in her personality, in her feelings about her sister and her family, but we know there is something false about her professions. Given her expressed bitterness about her family, the dream may reveal her sentiments

that she should have died instead of Leopoldine; everyone would have been happier if their “favorite” had lived. The main point here, though, is that this subconscious manifestation of Adele’s torment again has nothing to do with Pinson. He never appears in her dreams or in her half-conscious ravings. While this may simply indicate that she feels she cannot fulfill her romantic ideal without him, I would suggest that it is more consistent to consider the dream as



further evidence of her familial problems; the dream emphasizes that the obsession with Pinson is compensation for something she missed in her family; the obsession is retribution for feeling overshadowed by her supposedly romantically fulfilled sister's death and by the vastness of her father's reputation.

There is extensive support in the film for this theme of compensation. Adele and Pinson both mention that the Hugo's found Pinson unacceptable as a husband for Adele. Whatever their reasons for objecting to Pinson, when Adele writes of her desperation and need for their comfort, Hugo agrees to let them marry. The scene in which Adele receives her father's permission to marry Pinson is quite curious. Before reading the letter of consent, she tells a young boy that her name is Leopoldine; after she reads the letter, she returns to the child and tells him that she had lied and that her "real name is Adele" (102). It is not particularly significant that Adele uses Leopoldine's name; she must feel on some level that she would like to be her romantically fulfilled and preferred sister. On a familial level, Adele's reclaiming of her own name is quite significant. When her father allows her to marry, she feels she has been recognized and given value at last; she can proudly assume her own name. Ironically, she has received permission to achieve her independence and her romantic ideal. The ability to take pride in her identity is expanded in her letter to her parents in which she lies and says she has married Pinson. She has already exhibited her pride in having attained her parents' recognition by using her own first name; but, more importantly and more ironically, in gaining permission to marry Pinson, she will no longer be Adele Hugo; she feels she will come out from the shadow of that name. She writes: "In the future, you will address me as follows: 'Madame Pinson, 33 North Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia.' Be sure to spell out 'Madame' clearly on the address" (117).

While feminist viewers may find it distressing that Adele feels her fulfillment lies in assuming some man's name and receiving her father's recognition, the same concerns that artistic and creative women have struggled with for centuries underlie Adele's drive to be married. She has been ignored as an artist; her talents have been scoffed by her famous father. One is reminded of F. Scott Fitzgerald's condescending attitude toward his wife Zelda's writing or of the male sentiment that a woman's efforts in art are mere dabblings. Twice Adele mentions her efforts to publish her music: "Don't forget to give me the news of my music album. Have you sent it to the publishers?" and "In addition to my allowance, I need three hundred francs immediately. I've asked you a hundred times to have my music published. If you had done what I asked, I wouldn't have to behave like a beggar" (111-112). This last statement is a preview of the scene on the Guernsey shore where Adele says that it is incredible "that a girl who today begs her father for her daily bread, would come into her own within four years." Yet Adele knows that her concern about being a beggar would not be answered by marriage; for it is in the same letter that she tells her parents that she is married that she complains about having to behave like a beggar because Hugo will not have her music published. Married or not, Adele would still suffer the lack of artistic recognition. Adele's earlier complaints about the indignities that women suffer underscore the universality of her position: "I want to think now, of my sisters who suffer in bordellos and my

sisters who suffer in marriage . . . They must be given liberty, dignity, a mind of their own, and a heart to love with" (84).

Later in the film, Adele's concern with her sisters who suffer combines with her ambiguous feelings about her family name and her knowledge that marriage is not really an answer for the artistic woman. Before leaving the boarding house, Adele discusses her position with Mrs. Saunders who tells Adele that she should not worry about Pinson's refusal to marry her, that he is not worthy of her. Adele answers, "You're wrong, Mrs. Saunders. I was the one who refused to marry. I think marriage is degrading for a woman, particularly for a woman like me. My work requires solitude. Besides, think of my name, Mrs. Saunders. Think of who my father is. I would never give up the name of Mademoiselle Hugo" (151). While the viewers realize that Adele is lying about her refusal to marry Pinson, they cannot deny the truths of her statement. Her pursuit of marriage has been degrading. Adele has been defeated; she must know that she'll never marry Pinson, and, more significantly, she knows that her difficulties with her surname are permanent ones; married or unmarried, she will never give up the traumas of being Mademoiselle Hugo. It is immediately following these words that the first appearance of the scene with Adele on the Guernsey shore, looking hopeful about her future accomplishment, occurs. Obviously, it is impossible for Adele to come into her own by following Pinson. At this point, she has no money to continue living at Mrs. Saunders' house; living in a dormitory for destitute women, she awaits money from her father and gradually becomes mad.

At the end of the film, Pinson's insignificance is again demonstrated when Adele, walking entranced through the streets of Barbados, passes him without a sign of recognition when he comes to confront her. He has only been a symbol. He means nothing to her now that her obsession has been totally internalized in insanity. All that remains is for Adele to return to the "warmth" of her family. Yet, before Truffaut repeats the Guernsey shore scene, his narrator says that while Victor Hugo's coffin was followed by two million Parisians, Adele's death went unnoticed. As he says this, a shot of Adele's grave appears. Her gravestone, and the gravestone of her mother, are relatively barren of words; hers only says her name and her life dates; her mother's only says "Adele Femme de Victor Hugo," wife of Victor Hugo. Behind these two graves, we can barely see the gravestones of Victor Hugo and his beloved daughter Leopoldine. These stones are covered with epitaphs. Although, since Adele survived her family, it is natural that her stone is barren, Truffaut demonstrates here, on the visual and figurative level, that Adele was stifled by the Hugo reputation, driven mad by competition with her dead sister, and starved by the absence of artistic recognition. Adele walked over the sea, from the Old to the New World, but she accomplished nothing.

¹ All page references are to Francois Truffaut, *The Story of Adele H.*, edited by Helen C. Scott, Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1976. This reference, p. 185.