



---

From Film to Reading and Writing: L'Histoire d'Adèle H.

Author(s): Lois D. Vines

Source: *The French Review*, Feb., 2000, Vol. 73, No. 3 (Feb., 2000), pp. 539-548

Published by: American Association of Teachers of French

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/398183>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



American Association of Teachers of French is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The French Review*

JSTOR

## From Film to Reading and Writing: *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.*

by Lois D. Vines

THE AVAILABILITY of French films on videocassette at reasonable cost offers the opportunity to make use of this important medium at all levels of language learning. As I include more films in my French courses I am concerned about students having ample opportunities to improve their reading and writing skills. There is no doubt in my mind that films help develop listening and speaking skills; the visual image inspires even the most reticent student to offer comments. However, while teaching a generation of students brought up on television and movies, I am determined not to let these media demolish an interest in reading and writing, activities that play a major role in my advanced conversation and composition courses. The circumstances that led to the production of Truffaut's *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* are as fascinating as the film itself and give students the opportunity to read autobiography, biography, letters, diaries, and poetry in French. The film also engages students in interesting writing activities.

Truffaut found the subject for his feature film in a book by the late Frances Vernor Guille (1908–1975), a French professor at the College of Wooster in Ohio. Guille spent many years transcribing and doing research on the diaries of Adèle Hugo, the youngest child of the poet. In the first volume of *Le Journal d'Adèle Hugo* (1968), Guille described the discovery of the diaries and included Adèle's biography, which she had to piece together from various sources. Truffaut was captivated by the passion of Adèle, who, without her family's knowledge, went alone to Halifax, Nova Scotia in search of an English army officer, Albert Pinson, with whom she had fallen in love eight years earlier on the island of Jersey, where the Hugo family was living in exile. After pursuing Pinson in vain for three years in Halifax and six years in Barbados, Adèle, demented and on the verge of physical collapse, was accompanied back to France, where she spent the last forty-three years of her life in a psychiatric clinic. Her death in 1915 attracted very little attention during a period when the First World War was the major preoccupation. Many readers of newspaper accounts of her death were surprised to learn that Victor Hugo had a younger daughter. Léopoldine's tragic death had

been immortalized in her father's poetry; Adèle's existence was all but forgotten, the family preferring that she sink into oblivion. When Frances Guille began transcribing Adèle's diaries with the intention of publishing them, she learned that the executor of the Hugo estate had previously refused to allow them to become public, insisting that he was the guardian of the family secrets.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately for Guille, when she negotiated permission to publish, she also managed to include the rights to a future film on the subject of Adèle, a project that by chance fell into the very capable hands of François Truffaut.<sup>2</sup>

*L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* begins at the moment when Adèle steps off the ship in Halifax, where most of the film takes place. We witness her painful attempts to renew her relationship with Pinson and her struggle to convince the Hugo family to recognize her engagement and marriage, which in reality never take place. After giving a brief introduction to the film, I have the students view it outside of class. Our discussion is then based on various aspects of the film, including Truffaut's technique of using framing in many scenes and Adèle's transforming her obsession with Pinson into a religion based on her concept of love. During this discussion, many questions arise that are not addressed in the film: What kind of life did she have before arriving in Halifax? How did she meet Pinson? What was her relationship with Léopoldine? What happened after Adèle returned home from Barbados? And then my question to the students on a subject that has fascinated me: How did Frances Guille discover the diaries and manage to write the biography of a woman who was almost forgotten? Answers to these questions are found in a collection of texts from French sources which I organize and put on reserve in the library for students to read in preparation for further discussion and writing activities.

## Reading

After Guille published her first two volumes of the diaries, three authors used her research to develop their own books on Adèle. Auguste Joyau's *Adèle Hugo, la mal-aimée* (1981), published in Martinique, has an interesting chapter on Adèle in Barbados. In 1985 Henri Guillemin published *L'Engloutie: Adèle, fille de Victor Hugo*, which is the best work on the subject to date. In addition to drawing on Guille as a source, Guillemin researched Victor Hugo's diaries and many unpublished family letters, thus bringing additional information to the mysterious life of the forgotten daughter. The Canadian writer Leslie Smith Dow wrote the first book in English on the subject, bearing the French title *Adèle Hugo, La Misérable* (1993). Her work is done in the style of historical fiction; she documents her sources in Guille and others but also creates Adèle's feelings and thoughts. Student reading assignments, all in French, are from Guille, Joyau, and Guillemin.

Depending on the difficulty of the text, the students are asked to read between 15–25 pages for each assignment. One of my goals is to increase their reading speed and comprehension, especially when reading for information and doing research. I give them questions in advance to guide the reading and to be used as notes for discussion and writing activities. The assigned texts are indicated below after a brief presentation of the subjects.

### *Discovery of Adèle's Manuscripts*

While doing research on François-Victor Hugo, youngest son of the poet,<sup>3</sup> Frances Guille came across letters written by the son to his mother in which Adèle's escape to Canada and Barbados was the subject of a great deal of worry in the family. After publishing her study on François-Victor, Guille continued to be intrigued by the subject of Adèle. By pursuing various references to manuscript pages of a diary written by Adèle during the Hugo family exile on the Channel Islands, Guille learned that roughly 6000 pages could be located, one-third of them at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York and two-thirds at the Maison de Victor Hugo in Paris. According to Guille's research, the manuscript pages were found at Hauteville House, the Hugo residence on Guernsey, by Julie Foucher (sister of Adèle's mother) after Victor Hugo's death in 1885. The diary was acquired by a Guernsey junk dealer, who in turn sold the pages to a manuscript collector in London. It is still a mystery how the manuscript pages became separated. In the early 1900s the millionaire J. P. Morgan bought a bound collection of part of the manuscript as an acquisition for his new library in New York. The remaining 4000 loose sheets ended up in boxes at the Hugo house in Paris, where Guille was able to examine them. Astounded and fascinated, Guille embarked on a lifelong project, the transcription of Adèle's daily thoughts and observations written during the exile on Jersey and Guernsey between 1852 and 1862, with the greatest number of pages from 1852–56.

The task was daunting. Guille estimated that 8% of the manuscript pages at the Morgan Library and 28% of those in Paris were written in a secret code that Adèle invented to hide her most intimate thoughts (and thus the most interesting!). In some cases deciphering was not too difficult: *snas* for *sans*, *siam* for *mais*, and *sap* for *pas*. However, the scrambling of longer words such as *siblehenprécomin* (*incompréhensible*) and the combining of two words into one before scrambling made the job of transcribing a tedious puzzle. Even the pages not written in code were often difficult to decipher. When short on paper, Adèle wrote horizontally on a sheet, then turned it sideways and wrote vertically with the lines intersecting. Words scratched out, scribbled, and written over on faded pages in ink or pencil made for slow progress in the transcription. Photocopies of sample pages from the manuscript included in the first volume of *Le*

*Journal d'Adèle* give an idea of the incredible effort needed to render Adèle's diary legible and to provide annotations that make it interesting to read. Guille points out that one of the most difficult aspects of preparing the diaries for publication was dating the entries. Only occasionally did Adèle indicate the day, month, or year. In order to provide dates that would be as accurate as possible Guille did research on the migration of birds mentioned in the diary, on historical events (the death of a famous person, for example), and on the visits of well-known individuals to the Hugo house. Guille devoted her last twenty years to bringing Adèle back to life, often involving her own students in the research and deciphering of the diaries. (Reading: Guille 1: 9–33)

*Adèle's Life before Exile; the Léopoldine Tragedy*

"Née de père inconnu." In Truffaut's film Adèle repeats this phrase several times as the camera focuses in on her tormented face.<sup>4</sup> Within the context of the film, we can interpret this thought as an expression of a strong desire to establish her own identity in a new situation. Known in Halifax as Miss Lewly, Adèle attempted to hide her connection with the most famous poet in the world and was determined to become her own person. Further reading on the subject of her birth reveals that there was speculation as to whether Victor Hugo was her biological father. During the three-year period before Adèle's birth on July 28, 1830, her mother had a close relationship with Charles Sainte-Beuve, a critic and writer who spent a great deal of time in the Hugo household. When Sainte-Beuve confessed his love, Victor Hugo was outraged but nonetheless chose Sainte-Beuve to be the godfather of Adèle, who was named after her mother. Sainte-Beuve's biographer, Harold Nicolson, was convinced that the relationship with Adèle-la-mère was platonic before the daughter's birth, but Sainte-Beuve's decision to publish *Le Livre d'amour*, in which his love for both Adèles is evident, only added to the scandal and speculation. Adèle was ten years old when the book came out, thus it is unlikely that she could have been sheltered from the scandal surrounding the relationship between her mother and Sainte-Beuve.

Adèle's childhood to the age of thirteen seems to have been happy, although her older siblings often received more attention and her father had lingering suspicions about her paternity. Letters she exchanged with her parents reveal a loving relationship, and Adèle's recollections in her diary written years later are, for the most part, positive (Guille 1: 43–48). The Hugo house was always filled with agitation, both political and literary. Adèle attracted the attention of many well-known guests by her young beauty and musical talent. In September 1843, shortly after Adèle turned thirteen, a tragic event occurred that would change her family's life forever. Her sister Léopoldine drowned in a boating accident along with her husband of seven months, Charles Vacquerie, who tried desper-

ately to save her. In Truffaut's film Léopoldine plays an important role in Adèle's thoughts (especially in two nightmares in which she sees herself drowning) and in her obsession with ideal love, which she felt her sister had found but would forever be denied to her. Believing she could communicate with Léopoldine's spirit, Adèle recorded the dialogue of these séances in her diary. There is a brief scene in the film in which Adèle awakens her hosts as she is trying to communicate with Léopoldine, but further reading is necessary in order to appreciate fully the importance of these séances in her obsession and as an indication of her mental illness. (Readings: Guille 1: 35–52; Guille 3: 17–67: "Textes Personnels" [Adèle Talking with the Spirits]; Guillemin 13–31)

*Life on Jersey and Guernsey; Meeting Lieutenant Pinson; the Great Escape*

On December 2, 1851, Louis Napoleon dissolved the government and installed an authoritarian regime with himself as head, becoming Emperor Napoléon III. In disgust Victor Hugo went into voluntary exile in Brussels after his two sons were imprisoned for their political activities. Realizing that his exile would probably be lengthy, Hugo moved to Jersey and later to Guernsey, islands under British rule but physically close to France. Adèle, a twenty-two-year-old at the prime of her beauty and popularity, had to leave Paris to join the family in what became for her a social exile. The quiet life on the islands was very conducive to Victor Hugo's prolific literary production, and he insisted that other members of the family engage in writing projects as well. In 1852 Adèle began the first pages of a diary that would be published over a century later. Frances Guille was deeply moved by a sentence she came across in one of the diaries. Adèle, referring to herself as "une femme du dix-neuvième siècle qui s'adresse au vingtième," predicted she would write a book that would be read in 1954 (Guille 1: 33)! Although Guille's first volume of the diaries came out in 1968, she began her research on them in the 1950s. Adèle's prediction made Guille all the more determined to bring the diaries out of obscurity.

An account of the daily life in the Hugo household, Adèle's journal describes visitors who came to pay homage to her father and relates details of their conversations. The most interesting parts for students to read are those in which she reveals thoughts on her own significant relationships, especially her love for Albert Pinson, the person who would change her life. Pinson spent the summer of 1854 on Jersey, where he was a frequent visitor at Marine-Terrace, the Hugo house. Although the family considered him an "arriviste," Adèle fell in love with this gentleman "aux yeux ravissants." He apparently proposed marriage at one point, but she refused. Her presumed fiancé and the family favorite was Auguste Vacquerie, brother of Léopoldine's deceased husband. After meeting the dashing British officer, Adèle developed a loathing for Vacquerie and,

later, a determination to marry Pinson, who then turned her down with numerous excuses. They continued to correspond and probably met during Adèle's trips to England with her mother. When she learned that Pinson had been transferred to Halifax, Adèle set off alone for Canada (via England) in June 1861 aboard the *Great Eastern* bound for New York. Her escape was a bold adventure for her and a scandal in the family. François Truffaut admired Adèle's courage and determination to seek her own life. The last image in *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* is a freeze-frame of Adèle standing on a rocky coast repeating a sentence she wrote in her diary during the exile on Guernsey: "Cette chose incroyable de faire qu'une jeune fille marche sur la mer, passe de l'ancien monde au nouveau monde pour rejoindre son amant. Cette chose-là, je la ferai." Truffaut wanted to fix Adèle in our minds as the passionate romantic rather than the demented victim of unrequited love. (Readings: Guille 1: 52–58, 59–81; Guille 2: 457–70 [*Cahier intime d'Adèle*])

*Life in Halifax; Communicating with the Family Back Home*

In his film Truffaut chose to focus on Adèle in Halifax without any flashbacks to her earlier life. He mentioned in an interview that he was attracted by her obsessive character, which he portrays in numerous scenes that follow Guille's account almost exactly. Adèle communicated regularly with her brother François-Victor, who then wrote to their mother recounting news of Adèle. Although in the film Adèle exchanges letters with her father, in reality Victor Hugo was far too busy to bother himself with this task, which he assigned to his son. Most of the details concerning Adèle's life in Canada were gleaned from François-Victor's letters to his mother and from Guille's interviews with descendants of the families who knew Adèle during her three-year stay in Halifax.

As part of the reading assignment, I ask students to take notes on specific aspects of Adèle's biography that Truffaut chose to dramatize in the film and to observe how he embellished them. For example, Adèle's interest in mesmerism inspired Truffaut to create a rather long episode in which she tries to engage a hypnotist to coerce Pinson into marrying her. I also ask the students to suggest elements they would have developed, had they been the filmmaker. (Readings: Guille 1: 81–108; Guillemain 89–100, 101–21, 122–40)

*Six Years on the Island of Barbados*

Although Adèle spent more time in Barbados (1866–72) than in Halifax (1863–66), only the last fifteen minutes of Truffaut's film show her on the tropical island, still clad in her worn out, heavy clothes and wandering aimlessly in the streets, where children taunt her. It is interesting to note

that the earliest published account of Adèle in Barbados predates Guille's first volume of her diaries. Auguste Joyau in his *Aventurières de la mer Caraïbe* (1957)<sup>5</sup> includes a chapter entitled "Adèle et les trois messes," which is based on a story that circulated in the islands for many years. A priest from Trinidad recounted that a local woman came to him in 1885 requesting three funeral Masses for a friend. When the priest asked the name of the deceased, the black woman replied humbly, "Victor Hugo." The woman was Céline Alvarez Baa, who had accompanied Adèle back to France in 1872. When she took leave of the great poet, he asked her to say three Masses upon learning of his death, a promise she fulfilled thirteen years later. Joyau's chapter, written in a simple style, gives some details on what was known about Adèle in the islands.

Another source of information about Adèle in Barbados is a letter published in the *New York Tribune* in 1885 and reprinted in other American publications. Its author, identified only as "P.," describes his recollection of seeing Adèle wandering on the streets of Bridgetown when he was a young boy. This letter, translated into French and included in Guille's introduction, was the source for Truffaut's portrayal of Adèle's life on the island. (Readings: Guille, 1: 134–38; Joyau [1957] 174–84; Joyau [1981] 9–11, 21–24, 180–94, 209–13)

### *Returning Home*

Truffaut's Madame Baa is quite different from the person we discover in written texts. According to Joyau's account, she made her living traveling among the islands selling various things and could read and write. She took Adèle in off the streets, nursed her back to better physical and mental health, and corresponded with Victor Hugo, who asked her to accompany Adèle back to France. Upon arriving at the port of Saint-Nazaire, Adèle was met by a doctor her father had sent and was immediately taken to a clinic in Paris. What we are able to learn about her life during the first thirteen years after her return comes from Victor Hugo's diaries. In a rather bizarre twist, Guille recounts that Hugo had an affair with Mme Baa, a detail mentioned in his diary. Although his virility and promiscuity were legendary, it is difficult to imagine this tryst in the context of Truffaut's Madame Baa.

Very little is known about Adèle's forty-three years spent in psychiatric clinics except that she continued to love music, enjoyed gardening, and wrote obsessively, although her manuscripts from those years have never been found. When she died in 1915, an article in the *New York Times* was titled, "Adèle Hugo Dies at 85; Tragic Life Story of Novelist's Daughter Was Never Revealed." It was not until sixty years later with Truffaut's film based on Frances Guille's research that Adèle's dramatic life was brought to the public.

*L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* was selected as best foreign film at the New York Film Festival in 1975. Attending the gala premiere were Isabelle Adjani, whose film career was launched by her performance as Adèle, François Truffaut, and Frances Guille. Sadly, a week later Guille became ill while teaching a class at the College of Wooster and died shortly afterwards. The third volume of *Le Journal d'Adèle* was published posthumously in 1984, leaving volumes four and five still in manuscript form. (Readings: Guille 1: 109–16; Joyau [1981] 194–98; Guillemin 151–58)

## Writing

After viewing *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* the first time and taking notes on their readings, students watch the film again on their own. Their reaction after the second viewing is very enthusiastic because their reading brings new insights to many scenes and a more in-depth understanding of Adèle. Before they begin the reading assignments, I give them a description of the writing activities so that they can take notes and come up with their own ideas. Although based on the film and readings, the writing activities are for the most part creative.

### *An Imaginary Diary*

In the film Adèle spends much of her time writing; by the end of her stay in Halifax she has a book manuscript stashed in an old suitcase. Unfortunately, all of her manuscript pages from this period disappeared without a trace. I have my students write an imaginary “Journal d’Adèle” in which they briefly describe scenes from the film, then after each one they create Adèle’s thoughts in reaction to what happened. The description of the scenes provides practice in using the *passé composé* and *imparfait*; Adèle’s reflections offer the students a chance to be creative. A male student in the class decided to write “Le Journal d’Albert Pinson,” a very original work which gave a totally different perspective on the subject.

### *Creating a Séance*

As a form of entertainment in exile, members of the Hugo household and their guests engaged in an activity called “les tables tournantes” during which they communicated with the spirits. In her diary Adèle records conversations she had with the imaginary voices concerning her love for Pinson (Guille 3: 20–34). I have the students create a séance as an entertaining way to practice the interrogative. They are required to write twenty questions using ten different interrogative forms and invent the answers. In class they present their creations in pairs, with one person posing the questions and the other answering, an activity that often brings out their sense of humor.

*A Portrait of Adèle*

Adèle's haunting phrase, "Je suis une femme du dix-neuvième siècle qui s'adresse au vingtième," is the "point de départ" for a description of how she saw herself, what she disliked about her life, and how her goals were different from those of her time and social class. These thoughts are revealed in the film and the readings in her first-person descriptions, through her expression of frustrations, and even in the séances, when the voices she creates give her the answers she wants to hear. Students write a description of Adèle based on the aspects they find most interesting in her character. They can choose whether they want to write it in first or third person.

*Poetry—explication de texte*

Three poems by Victor Hugo are especially interesting in the context of *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* During our discussion of Léopoldine, I introduce the students to Hugo's well-known poem, "Demain, dès l'aube," written after his older daughter's death. In 1842, a year before the tragedy, Hugo composed "Mes Deux Filles," a poem that foreshadows the destiny of his two daughters in the line: "L'une pareille au cygne et l'autre à la colombe." It is evident in the poem that the swan is Léopoldine and the dove, Adèle. The image of the purity and beauty of the swan, a bird that stays close to water, suggests the eternal association of Léopoldine with the river where she drowned. The dove, which can fly high and prefers to live with a mate, suggests Adèle's flight to the new world in search of her ideal love. In the third poem, "A ma fille Adèle," Hugo evokes the beauty of his sleeping child, then imagines the end of his own life when Adèle will watch over him: "... tu rendras à ma tombe / Ce que j'ai fait pour ton berceau." Ironically, when Adèle returned to France, her father had to take care of her until the end of his life. After a discussion of the three poems in class, students choose one as the subject of an *explication de texte*.<sup>6</sup>

*Creating a Scene*

From their readings, the students focus on an incident that Truffaut did not include in his film and write their own scenario with the description of the scene and the dialogue. I then have them present their work in class, thus linking the written activity with an oral presentation. They recruit other members of the class as actors and help each other present.

Our class discussions about Truffaut's film are greatly enriched by the reading and writing activities. Adèle's experiences lead to topics that are of personal interest to students, such as self-realization, self-esteem, obsessive love, "being dumped" (as one student put it), relationships with siblings,

and becoming independent from parents. The final part of Adèle's life brings up the topic of how the mentally ill were treated during her time and today. Fifteen years after starring in *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.*, Isabelle Adjani dramatized a similar role of obsessive love and mental illness in *Camille Claudel*, another film that inspires reading and writing activities.<sup>7</sup>

OHIO UNIVERSITY

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Guille expressed her gratitude to Professor Frederick Hoffherr, Columbia University, who worked on Adèle's manuscripts from 1926 until his death in 1956 without ever receiving permission to publish them (Guille 1: 18–19).

<sup>2</sup>Even after Truffaut began work on the film, he had to overcome the objections of Jean Hugo, the poet's great-grandson, who wrote: "Je me demande si cette triste histoire, qui a été longtemps un secret de famille jalousement gardé ne sera pas choquante à l'écran" (De Baecque and Toubiana 471).

<sup>3</sup>The first child, Léopold (1823) died as an infant. Among the other four children, Adèle was the only one to outlive Victor Hugo (1802–1885); Léopoldine (1824–1843); Charles (1826–1871); François-Victor (1828–1873), and Adèle (1830–1915).

<sup>4</sup>Truffaut also was "né de père inconnu." At the age of twelve he secretly read his father's diary and learned that Roland Truffaut was not his biological father. After becoming a successful film director, he hired a detective to locate his father but in the end decided not to confront him. The identity he felt with Adèle on this point no doubt inspired him to include it in the film (De Baecque and Toubiana 22–23).

<sup>5</sup>Joyau later included "Adèle et les trois messes" in *Adèle Hugo, la mal-aimée* (1981).

<sup>6</sup>For a description of the *explication de texte*, see Jean-Marie Schultz's article, "The Uses of Poetry in the Foreign Language Curriculum" *French Review* 69.6 (May 1996): 920–32.

<sup>7</sup>I would like to thank Professor David Wilkin of the College of Wooster for his help with my research on Frances Guille.

### Works Cited

- De Baecque, Antoine, and Serge Toubiana. *François Truffaut*. Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- Dow, Leslie Smith. *Adèle Hugo, La Misérable*. Fredericton, New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1993. (In English).
- Guille, Frances Vernor. ed. *Le Journal d'Adèle Hugo*. Vol. 1 (1852), Paris: Minard, 1968; Vol. 2 (1853), Paris: Minard, 1971; Vol. 3 (1854), Paris: Minard, 1984.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *François-Victor Hugo*. Paris: Nizet, 1951.
- Guillemin, Henri. *L'Engloutie: Adèle, fille de Victor Hugo, 1830–1915*. Paris: Seuil, 1985.
- Hugo, Victor. *Cœuvres poétiques*. 2 Vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1964, 1967.
- Joyau, Auguste. *Héroïnes et aventurières de la mer Caraïbe*. Fort-de France, Martinique: Editions des Horizons Caraïbes, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Adèle Hugo, la mal-aimée*. Morne-Rouge, Martinique: Editions des Horizons Caraïbes, 1981.
- Nicolson, Harold. *Sainte-Beuve*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957.
- Truffaut, François, dir. *L'Histoire d'Adèle H.* Paris, 1975.